University students use of social media in China and the UK: an exploration into the role of social media in learning

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

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September 2023

Abstract

This project seeks to explore the role of social media in learning for university students in China and the UK. Given the prevalence of social media in the lives of many young people around the world, there is a pressing need to understand what this means for the ways in which they approach and experience learning. However, there is also a need to understand the nuanced ways in which social media are experienced and embedded in different contexts, and how these contexts and educational landscapes in turn impact how students approach and utilise social media for learning purposes. This project involves two notably different contexts in terms of both social media and higher education: China and the UK. Through this examination of two separate contexts, this project presents considerations for educational practitioners and researchers interested in understanding the ways social media are impacting learning in higher education setting.

Data were collected through questionnaires and focus groups at two higher education institutions, one in China and one in the UK. The findings confirm that social media was consistently a part of many students' daily lives in both countries despite the differences in social media landscape. Though a limited presence in formal learning currently in both contexts, social media was present in these students' informal and non-formal learning, and they were shaped by the specific contexts of their formal learning environments. Hence, this thesis proposes that social media plays the role of connecting formal, informal and non-formal learning and blending them as a continuum.

Whilst there is a growing body of research around the application and potential of social media in education, this project contributes to the research by examining the current uses of social media in the lives of the students the role of social media in their learning.

Acknowledgement

My PhD research has been a long journey full of ups and downs. As this journey is approaching to its destination, I would like to take this chance to thank the people who have helped me throughout this journey and supported me through the toughest of times.

Firstly, my deepest thanks go to my supervisors: Dr. Harry Dyer and Prof. Yann Lebeau. Thank you for your enormous patience reading through my messy drafts over the years. Your insightful comments have always provided me with plenty of food for thought. I also want to express my gratitude my previous supervisors: Prof. Richard Andrews, Prof. Ming Cheng, Dr. Vander Viana, thank you all for your help and guidance during your time at UEA.

I would like to extend my thanks to the participants who have participated in this research, especially the people who have helped me spreading the words of the research. I was fortunate to meet all of you and get to hear your opinions about social media and learning.

I am also grateful for the staff and my fellow PhD researchers at the School of Education and Lifelong Learning. Weici and Hélène, thank you for your constant encouragements especially during the darkest days of my PhD.

To my best friend—Dr. Yogarajah (props to me for not forgetting your title), thank you for being there for me and inspire me to work as hard as you. I hope you become the best plastic surgeon of your dreams.

Finally, I am forever indebted to my family in China. To my parents, thank you for supporting me studying abroad, I simply would not have been able to be pursing my PhD without your support. Please forgive me for being absent for the family in the last four years, I hope to reunite with you soon.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 My journey into the research topic

Growing up in the late 1990s, I am fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to mature alongside advancing technological innovations. I still remember the thrill of seeing my father bringing home the first computer when I was in primary school. The visuals on the digital screen absolutely had little me hooked. During my limited time that I was allowed to use the computer, I begged my family to set up a QQ account for me—the à la mode Chinese social media platform at that time. Then, my first social media experiences consisted of me repeatedly messaging 'Nihao (Hello)' to my only contact on QQ—my classmate (because I was fascinated to see that you can 'talk' on the computer). Fast forward to today, I no longer use QQ, nor do I 'harass' everyone in my contact lists just to say 'Nihao'. I have witnessed the evolution of different social media platforms over the past two decades. Though my preferences and usage may have changed over time, social media still remains relevant in my daily life. Having been an active social media user for many years, it feels instinctive for me to opt for researching subjects that are closely connected to the realm of social media.

My educational journey also plays a part in leading me to researching social media and learning. I was born and raised in mainland China and finished my bachelor's degree in English there. During my undergraduate studies, one of my lecturers encouraged us to visit English speaking countries; she said that it would be a pity for us English majors not to visit the place where the language is used. Inspired by her words, I decided to do a master's degree in the UK. When I was preparing the English language test (IELTS) for studying in the UK, I was active on Weibo (a Chinese social media platform), following accounts that posted useful information for exam preparations and UK universities applications. I followed some 'influencer' teachers on Weibo and even signed up for their online courses focusing on the English speaking test (my weakness). Using social media enabled me to stay up to date with the latest exam information and gain access to the educational resources that I needed, especially given that there was no formal preparation for studying abroad in my university. After I got the offer to study an MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at the University of York, I found others who were also going to study in York on social media, and even managed to travel with them to York. This made my first time travelling outside of China less daunting. Moreover, I also found the WeChat (a Chinese social media platform)

group chats made up of my course mates and made some friends before my master study started. The group chats were also helpful in terms of staying in touch with my peers throughout my master's study.

After I obtained my master's degree, I went back to China and began working as an English teacher in a private language training school specialising in English language tests preparation (such as IELTS). During my time working there, I remember that on one occasion, my students showed me an app they had on their phones which had all the answers to our practice questions alongside detailed explanations. To protect the interests of the school and maintain an authoritative figure in the classroom, I told my students not to listen to the unreliable content online but to listen to their teachers. Privately, I could not help thinking how much useful information was available online which made paying for an expensive IELTS preparation course rather irrelevant. Soon afterwards, disagreeing with the school's approach, I quit my job and returned to academia to do a PhD. Despite my previous background of English teaching, I decided to research social media and learning for my PhD. This decision was driven by my personal experience of reaping the benefits of utilising social media for educational purposes. Furthermore, I observed that many young people had similar experiences of discovering useful educational resources on social media platforms or other websites. All of these led me to becoming more interested in educational technology. Thus, during the initial phase of my doctoral studies, I narrowed my focus to investigating university students' use of social media for learning.

1.2 Research background and rationale

At the turn of the 21st century, Prensky (2001a, 2001b) proposed the notion of 'digital native' to describe today's students who were born into a technology saturated world. He labelled the older generations who had adopted technology later in their lives as 'digital immigrants'. He further claimed that today's young people (even their brain structure) are fundamentally different from previous generations because they have been exposed to digital technology from an early age (Prensky, 2001a). His claims have caused a sense of crisis in the educational field, as the current education system is said to be ill-prepared for this new generation of learners (Bennett et al., 2008). At the same time, critics of the concept of the 'digital native' have pointed out that this notion wrongly assumes that all young people possess innate digital

skills, which is far from accurate (ICDL, 2014). Moreover, digital natives' familiarity with digital technologies does not mean that they are necessarily digitally competent. In fact, their so-called 'digital immigrant' teachers may have more advanced digital skills than them (Creighton, 2018). Thus, many strongly oppose the idea of the digital native. For example, Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) argue that the idea of the 'digital native' is a myth and that there is no such thing as an information-savvy digital native. Notwithstanding, after two decades, the concept of the 'digital native' continues to be the focus of debate (Evans & Robertson, 2020). While it is true that certain young individuals are exposed to digital technologies from an early age, it would be erroneous to assume that every young person possesses an inherent fondness for technology or is automatically proficient in its usage. Furthermore, the term 'digital native' is problematic as it perpetuates the stereotype that all young people possess inherent and universal digital literacy, while disregarding groups that may not fall into this category. Recognising that young people's technology use is of interests to many, I proposed a study involving the so-called 'digital natives'. However, my assumption was not that the participants in this study would necessarily fit the description of being highly proficient in technology. Rather, the purpose of this study was to explore and understand these young individuals in relation to their social media use and learning.

Perhaps the most contentious area to emerge from the internet is social media, which has become ubiquitous in our society. Yet, despite its widespread use in daily life, the concept of social media can be seen defined in numerous ways (see Section 3.4.1). As a key idea in this study, social media needs to be clarified early to establish the parameters of the investigation. One widely cited definition, offered by Boyd and Ellison in 2007, describes social media as "web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). Building on this definition, and for the purposes of this thesis, social media is understood as a collection of digitally networked platforms that enable users to interact with both content and one another. This conceptualisation is not limited to popular platforms such as WeChat, WhatsApp, Instagram, or Twitter. More importantly, I believe whether a platform is considered as social media depends largely on how it is used and understood by its users. In this perspective, this study adopts a broad and dynamic view of social media, recognising that

its definition is shaped by users themselves (i.e., the participants in this study) and how they choose to classify the platforms they engage with. This working definition is revisited and further refined in later chapters, particularly the findings (chapter 5 and 6) and discussion (chapter 7).

Social media platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat are extremely popular among young people under 30 (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). However, social media is not only widespread among young people, but it also offers many uses beyond that of a simple communication tool. During the Covid-19 pandemic, social media platforms were used as free, accessible digital tools that not only helped to alleviate feelings of loneliness but also provided valuable educational opportunities in a time of crisis (Greenhow & Chapman, 2020). Social media users can access educational resources and learn while using it. As Greenhow et al. (2019) put it "social media provide new opportunities for when, how, where, and with whom people learn—venue unimaginable 15 years ago" (p.178). This statement indicates the growing interest in researching the role of social media in education. In particular, social media is being examined and explored within various learning environments. For instance, there is a growing recognition that social media has the potential to bridge the gap between informal and formal learning (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Higher education institutions have been urged to incorporate social media sites within their educational frameworks, so as to enhance the learning experience for students (Mpungose, 2020). It is possible that use of social media by university students for their educational needs is likely to have an impact on their formal learning experiences. Hence, this study takes into consideration various learning types, including informal, formal and non-formal learning.

Despite the growing interests in social media in education, Barrot's (2021) review of social media research in the last decade have found that most of the research has only focused on certain platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. While these platforms could be considered as mainstream social media platforms among certain demographic groups, it might not effectively reflect how users utilise social media for learning as a whole. Therefore, my research on social media and learning is not limited to particular social media platforms. Instead, it focuses on the users themselves: how they utilise social media and what is the role of social media in their learning. It allows the participants to share their personal experiences and perspectives on using social media for learning purposes.

In addition, in focusing on university students, I selected two distinct research contexts: China and the UK. These two countries represent contrasting social media landscapes and educational environments. By including two different research sites, I hoped to provide a more nuanced, contextual understanding of how students in these two countries use social media and the role of social media for learning. As a Chinese national who has also studied in a UK university, it was possible to access potential participants in both research sites. However, I would like to clarify that the intention of this study was not to conduct a comparative analysis between university students in China and the UK in terms of their social media usage or higher education system. Rather, my objective was to showcase the unique situations and dynamics of social media usage among university students in these two countries.

1.3 Thesis structure

This thesis consists of eight chapters in total.

Chapter 1 Introduction includes a personal account of what led me to study this research topic as well as an overview of the research background and the rationale for the current study. It also formulates the thesis outline and clarification of terms.

Chapter 2 Context begins with China (with the focus on mainland China) and then United Kingdom (with the focus on England). It provides an overview of the educational context as well as the social media context. The contextual information is essential to understanding this research and helpful in providing explanations for the findings.

Chapter 3 Literature review is divided into three main sections: learning theories, higher education research and social media in education. It documented my exploration and review of the relevant scholarly work for this project.

Chapter 4 Methodology describes the methods that were employed in this research as well as the rationale for choosing such methods. It starts by addressing the philosophical foundations of this research and then moves to the research design, data collection and analysis processes. It also includes a short reflection about the research process.

Chapter 5 Results and analysis: China presents the results and analysis of data collected from university students in China. The quantitative results from the questionnaire are reported first, followed by the qualitative findings based on open-ended questions within the questionnaire. The findings generated by the focus groups are then presented and organised in terms of the main themes. The chapter concludes by comparing and contrasting the quantitative and qualitative data in a brief discussion.

Chapter 6 Results and analysis: UK reports on the results and findings from the questionnaire and focus groups conducted in the UK. The layout of this chapter is similar to chapter 5 in that it presents the analysis of the quantitative data first and then the qualitative data. A short discussion based on the triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative results is also included at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 7 Discussion draws together the findings emerging from the two research sites. It discusses and interprets the results and findings. Moreover, it also compares the findings in relation to relevant literature and empirical studies that were reviewed in chapter 3. It concludes by formulating the arguments of this thesis.

Chapter 8 Conclusion concludes the thesis by providing a summary of the main research findings. It then discusses the implications of the research findings and offers recommendations for promoting and supporting university students' learning in today's technology-proliferated world. It also acknowledges the limitations of this study and offers suggestions for future research.

1.4 Clarifications of the terms used in this thesis:

University students: This term only refers to undergraduate students.

Chinese/ UK university students: This is to show the location of the students, not the nationality/ethnicities.

Western: I acknowledge that this word can evoke associations with colonial history due to the historical dominance and influence of Western powers. In my thesis, where I use this term such as 'in the western world', it refers to geographic regions such as North America and Europe.

Chapter 2. Context--the relationship between context, technology, and education.

This chapter focuses on the contextual information of the two research sites in this study: China[1] and the United Kingdom (UK)[2]. As acknowledged in the previous chapter, these two countries have vast differences in terms of their educational systems and social media landscapes. Thus, the rationale for examining two countries in this study is not to have a direct comparison, but to provide two distinct, contextualised accounts of university students' use of social media within their own settings. The intention is to illustrate how social media practices could be shaped by the cultural, institutional, and practical/technological conditions of each context, thereby offering a broader range of student experiences and practices. By including both China and the UK, it enables the study to highlight the different ways social media is embedded in students' academic and everyday lives. Simons (2009) emphasised the importance of presenting multiple situated narratives in order to show how complex and nuanced things can be in different situations. Additionally, a recent study also stresses presenting multiple situated narratives illuminates the richness and complexity of social processes and allowing findings to be framed within specific contexts rather than generalisation (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). Conducting the same research in these two countries, it offers two complementary perspectives that collectively illuminate how sociocultural and educational factors may interact with social media practices, without presuming equivalence or direct comparability across national borders. Building on this rationale, the next step is to situate the research within the specific educational and technological contexts of the two sites. Since social media use is deeply rooted in local cultural, institutional, and technological conditions, it is important to outline the educational backgrounds and social media landscapes in which the participants of this study are located. The following sections of this chapter therefore provide an overview of the research contexts in China and the UK, highlighting the distinctive features of each setting that could contribute to shaping university students' engagements with social media in their daily lives and learning practices.

[1] With a focus on mainland China
[2] With a focus on England

To be more specific, it introduces these two countries' education systems, its internet and social media usage, following a sequential order starting with China and then moving on to the UK. Through a detailed description of the background information in the domains of education and technology, my aim for this chapter is to establish a robust foundation for comprehending the current research, shedding light on the various factors that may have contributed to the phenomenon being studied.

It is important to re-emphasise that the intention of this chapter is not to directly compare the UK and China (thus no common framework was used). As this chapter was written after the research was conducted, the selection of the topics covered was informed by the findings that emerged from each research site. This chapter draws mainly on government reports and incorporates various statistics to support the information presented. The scholarly discussion of the research topic is to be found in the literature review chapter (Chapter 3).

2.1 China educational context

2.1.1 A brief introduction to China's education system

As in many countries around the world, the Chinese education system can be roughly divided into primary education, secondary education and higher education. Based on the OECD (2016) report on China's education system, I have listed the most common age and school duration for students in China (see Table 2.1) who have chosen a traditional academic curriculum. The study participants from China will have followed this trajectory.

Table 2.1 China's education system, adapted from OECD (2016)

School level	Typical Duration	Typical age of a student
Pre-school	3 years	3-5
Elementary	6 years	6-11
Junior secondary	3 years	12-14
Senior secondary	3 years	15-17
Undergraduates	4 years	18-21
Postgraduates	2-3 years	22-24
PhD	Min.3 years	25 onwards

China is a huge country with over 1.4 billion population. Because of its size, China is often discussed at a provincial level and it is possible that there are differences from region to region. Therefore table 2.1 only reflects the most common scenarios. However, there are some aspects that inform the experiences of Chinese people nation-wide. In terms of education, these relate to policies and major examinations which structure education in China. Here, I briefly discuss compulsory education and the two major examinations prior to entering higher education.

A central educational policy that is implemented across the country is the nine-year compulsory education (*Jiunianyiwujiaoyu*) policy. This policy, as its name suggests, requires all children from the age of six to attend school for nine years. This includes six years of primary education and three years of junior secondary education. This policy was introduced in the late 1980s by the Chinese government to ensure that all school- aged children have access to basic education. It is written in the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China and was implemented by the joint efforts of local and central educational authorities. In the 1980s, China was going through a series of economic reforms also known as *Gaigekaifang*. These were based on the idea that education plays a crucial role in fostering economic growth. Therefore, insufficient opportunities for acquiring basic education could result in reduced abilities at both individual and national levels, perpetuating cycles of poverty (Zhang & Minxia, 2006). Thus, ensuring that every school- aged child in China receives a basic education was the priority of the Chinese government. This policy was successful in terms of reducing illiteracy rates and therefore promoting universal literacy. Moreover, it is said that

the goal of providing all students in China nine years of compulsory education was ultimately achieved in the 2000s, as data suggested that over 99.9% of children were enrolled in primary school (Wang et al., 2018).

At the end of the ninth year of compulsory education (end of junior high school), the students normally sit a public examination called *Zhongkao*, which is held annually and is often considered as a prerequisite to entering senior secondary school. *Zhongkao* is a graduation examination which marks the end of junior high school and is also an entrance examination to senior high school (Wu, 2015). Students at this stage can either attend a general senior secondary school (for higher education) or a vocational secondary school (for professional skills and employment). Usually, the entry requirements for vocational secondary schools are less demanding than for the general senior secondary schools. Vocational secondary schools are seen as a stigmatised alternative by some Chinese people: as Ling (2015) noted, there is a tendency to think that only bad students go to vocational schools[3].

On the other hand, people who went to general senior secondary school with the goal of pursuing higher education must pass *Gaokao* (college entrance examination) at the end of their study. *Gaokao* is probably one of the most important public examinations. Similar to *Zhongkao*, it is held annually in June at the end of senior secondary school. *Gaokao* has been in place for decades: first introduced in 1952 by the newly established government of People's Republic of China, it was suspended during the Cultural Revolution and then resumed in 1977 (Gu & Magaziner, 2016). *Gaokao* is the main criteria for university admission. This year of 2023, 13 million Chinese teenagers sat the *Gaokao* exam[4]. Such a large scale, nation-wide examination is no doubt of great importance. In fact, Gaokao is such an important examination that it is often seen as 'a matter of life and death to students and parents' (Zhu, 2012, p. 37). The well-known saying in China: 'One exam determines your entire life (*YiKaoDingZhongSheng*) strikes at the core of the issue (Heger, 2017) as admission to universities in China primarily relies on one's Gaokao results. Many people believe that Gaokao is the only fair competition as regardless of the students' socio-economic backgrounds, they are only being judged by their grades. People from less financially

[3] I decided not to discuss further on vocational school as it's not relevant for current study.
[4] Retrieved June 10, from
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/7/record-13m-students-sit-chinas-gaokao-college-entrance-exams

fortunate families tend to believe that this is their chance to rewrite their fate as they would be able to attend university which would open doors of employment. In addition, nowadays universities outside of China have started to accept Gaokao results for undergraduate entry. This also reflects the significant influence of Gaokao. For example, the University of Birmingham states on its website that it is the first Russell Group university to accept 'Gaokao' results for entry onto its undergraduate programmes (*GAOKAO Undergraduate Entry*, n.d.).

Of course, an examination of this importance is highly likely to cause problems. On the one hand, China encounters a range of issues attributable to its education system and pedagogy that excessively prioritise exams (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). The pedagogical approach in many secondary schools is exam-orientated, as the university admission rates are often considered as a reflection of the teaching quality in schools. On the other hand, Chinese students also suffer from a considerable amount of academic stress due to *Gaokao*. Research has shown that exam-related stress is damaging the mental health of Chinese youth (Zhao et al., 2015). Although in recent years, *Gaokao* has undergone constant reform to tackle these issues, and there are some alternative ways to access higher education, such as studying abroad, it remains one of the most important exams for the majority of Chinese pupils.

In short, China's education system can be seen as dominated by major polices and examinations. It begins with nine years of compulsory education and two major public examinations *Zhongkao* and *Gaokao* prior to higher education. Under such academic pressure, many Chinese teenagers lead a constrained lifestyle, particularly those in their final year of senior secondary school, focused on study and leaving little time for leisure pursuits. As expressed by Chinese students (see Heger, 2017; Pires & Duarte, 2019), the effort they invest in preparing for *Gaokao* is likely to be etched in their memories for a lifetime.

2.1.2 Higher education in China

2.1.2.1 Background information

Following the *Gaokao* examination, students have the option to pursue further education by enrolling in either general universities or vocational colleges. In this section, I concentrate on general universities rather than vocational colleges, as the participants in this study are exclusively selected from "general universities."According to the data released by the

Ministry of Education, China has over 40 million students, enrolled in a total of 3012 higher education institutions [5] (2021). In 2021, according to the state council of the Chinese government, the gross enrolment rate in higher education in China reached 57.8% (2022). These HE students are likely to be young adults in their early twenties, with only 1% of the population aged 25-29 enrolled in tertiary education and less than 1% for the population aged above 29, according to OECD data (2022).

Due to particular historical and political factors, the development of China's higher education system has faced various challenges and setbacks[6]. After *Gaokao* was restored in the late 1970s, China entered the Opening-up and Reform period. In the 1990s, two educational initiatives, named '985[7]' and '211[8]' projects, were launched by the Chinese government to improve the quality of higher education. Since then, the Chinese government has continued to play a central role in building its higher education system; in recent decades it has been expanding and this expansion is strongly regulated by the government (Wu et al., 2020).

Apart from the distinction between general universities and vocational colleges, there are official and unofficial ways to further categorise China's general universities. Officially, general universities fall into three tiers *(Yiben, Erben, Sanben)* with tier one considered to be the best. The tier system initially referred to the sequential order of admission into undergraduate programmes but is more commonly used as an indicator of its reputation. Being selected to be part of the 985 and 211 projects was also seen as an important symbol of excellence. Due to the substantial financial support that they receive from the Chinese government, universities named in these projects are typically regarded as top-tier institutions in China. This perhaps resembles the Russell group universities in the UK and Ivy

[5] This includes 1,270 general universities, 1,486 vocational colleges, and 246 adult higher education institutions)

[6] For instance, the Cultural Revolution happened in the 1960s-70s and *Gaokao* was suspended during this time.

[7] The "985 Project" (39 universities) was launched in 1998 and is named after its launch date, September 8th, 1998. Its objective is to establish world-class universities in China by providing increased funding and resources to select institutions.

8 The "211 Project" (115 universities) was initiated in 1995 and refers to the goal of developing 100 key Chinese universities and colleges by the 21st century.

League universities in the US. These groups of universities are highly esteemed and recognised for their academic excellence, research contributions and prestigious reputations.

Attending universities in China represents a phase of relative separation from the family. Many university students in China allocate a significant portion of their time on campus and most of them have no choice but to live in shared university accommodation which can mean four to eight individuals sharing a single room (Liu et al., 2021). While living in such close proximity with a range of personalities, habits or cultural backgrounds can lead to disagreements or potential conflicts (Liu et al., 2021), it is also a period in which lifelong friendships are formed. In addition, a typical university student in China will spend four years with the same classmates as well as roommates, further consolidating bonds with their peers.

2.1.2.2 Characteristics of China's HE system

This section discusses the unique characteristics of China's HE system, informed by the data collected. It explores specific aspects and attributes of the Chinese context that are reflected in the information and responses gathered from the participants in China. Given my insider status as a Chinese university student, this section is somewhat informed by subjective perspectives and interpretations. Having said that, the three key characteristics outlined here are well documented in the literature: state control, the role of high stakes examinations and Chinese cultures of learning.

A prominent feature that distinguishes HE in China is the significant level of state control. In fact, HEIs in China are subject to a 'dual administrative system' (Bodenhorn, 2020, p. 969) or 'dual controlling mechanism' (Wang, 2010, p. 477). These two co-existing controls can be understood as consisting of a macro level control from the government and micro level control from the university leaders within each HEI. The government exercises a 'top-down' control through layers of a bureaucratic structure from the central to local educational authorities. It maintains a tight oversight and various aspects of the higher education system, including curriculum design, university admissions, funding allocation, and ideological teachings are tightly regulated. As such, this significantly shapes the trajectory and overall progress of China HE system.

University leaders, meanwhile, appointed by the Communist Party of China, might possess limited expertise and knowledge regarding teaching and learning when compared to the actual teaching staff. As Bodenhorn (2020) puts it 'academic administrators and faculty members frequently find themselves dependent upon non-academic staff members for basic information about important academic policy developments, rules or new administrative practices' (p.974). According to Bodenhorn (2020), this dual administrative system alongside outdated management are what damages China HE's academic excellence and university autonomy. However, his view was contradicted by Pan (2007) case study of Tsinghua University[9], Pan (2007) argues that individual universities in China do have a degree of autonomy, despite complex power relations with the state. Indeed, while sharing a lot of similarities, each institution can still have its unique organisational structure, culture and management practices, which can in turn influence the relationship between administrators and educators. Tensions between management and teaching staff also vary among different universities, just as Bodhenhorn (2020) and Pan (2007) had difference stances on the Chinese universities' autonomy. Therefore, despite state control, each university can only be understood by taking into account its specific context and dynamics.

In relation to the students themselves, the curriculum emerges as one of the most evident consequences of the prevailing state control. Notably, the presence of ideological teaching stands out as a distinctive aspect of China's HE system. University students in China are required to take political ideology courses such as Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Xi Jinping Thought, as an integral component of their academic curriculum. There is an ongoing debate about ideological and political education in China.

The goal of compulsory ideological and political education in China is to foster citizenship education and research suggests that the current approach yields positive outcomes in terms of enhancing students' civic intention and promoting their civic expression (Zhang & Fagan, 2016). On the other hand, Zhang (2017) argues that the ideological and political curriculum implemented within China's HE system obstructs the development of independent and critical

[9] One of the top universities in China

thinking among Chinese undergraduate students, particularly those pursuing studies in the arts, humanities and social sciences.

Another characteristic of China's HE is the various major examinations which are held at a national level, in other words, they are not necessarily part of the curriculum or assessment. Some of those examinations are often considered prerequisites for the awarding of their degrees while some are to enhance their career prospects (see below).

English language proficiency exams:

- *National College English Test (CET): band 4 (CET-4) and band 6 (CET-6) (for undergraduates majoring any discipline except English)*
- *Test for English Majors (TEM): band 4 (TEM-4) and band 8 (TEM-8)*

Career/degree related qualifications:

- *Examples: Teacher qualification certificate; National Judicial Examination; China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI); Civil service examinations*

Other general skills exams:

- *Putonghua ShuiPing Ceshi (Mandarin Chinese proficiency test)*
- *National Computer ranking examinations*

Exams for continuing education after bachelor's degree

- *Unified National Graduate Entrance Examination (China's Postgraduate graduate entrance exam)*
- *International English Language Testing System (IELTS); Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (English language test for students who wish to study in English speaking countries)*

From the above examinations, the English language proficiency tests deserve special attention. CET-4 was first launched in 1987, administered by the National College English Testing Committee on behalf of the Higher Education Department, Ministry of Education (Zheng & Cheng, 2008). CET-4 represents a benchmark for achieving a general standard of English language proficiency, whereas passing the CET-6 represents an even higher standard (Gu, 2018). Therefore, many students strive to pass at least CET-4. Over the past few decades, the English language tests in China have generated controversies, particularly regarding those tests' washback effects (Han, 2021). This is probably because CET-4 is a mandatory exam for all non-English major university students in China. Such a significant exam could impact the English teaching and learning approaches, leading to a narrow focus on exam-oriented strategies aimed at achieving a pass. Although the importance of such large-scale exams is

being increasingly questioned, in 2017 alone, nearly 10 million people took CET-4 and CET-6 exams (Gu, 2018).

The third characteristic is the unique culture[10] of Chinese learners and this is also evident in HE. Traditionally, Chinese culture values education and particularly respects the teachers. Under the influence of Confucianism, individuals need to present themselves in a socially acceptable manner and support others in maintaining their social identities (Zhang et al., 2011). This is also called maintaining 'face'. As teachers are often seen as the authoritative figure in the classroom, interrupting or raising questions can be seen as threatening the teacher's authority, therefore losing 'face'. This explains why Chinese students may be reluctant to speak in class. Zhu and O'Sullivan (2020) study found that Chinese students also avoid speaking because they themselves are afraid of losing face. Xu and Hu (2020) note that the Chinese culture also plays a role in how doctoral students respond to supervisors' feedback and that students take this culture with them when they go to study abroad. One participant said: '*All I learned in my past education in China is to respect and listen to the teachers. They are not supposed to be challenged and questioned*' (p.728).

2.2 Internet and the social media use in China

2.2.1 Internet usage and infrastructure

According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), there were 1,011 million internet users in China as of June 2021 (2021). This indicates that most people in China use the internet as China's entire population stands at approximately 1.4 billion. However, significant variations exist in terms of internet access across various regions within China. For example, Beijing, the capital city of China, reported the highest percentage of internet penetration while in the inland province of Jiangxi, penetration is a third lower (McDonald, 2016). Though improvements may have occurred since this 2016 study, regional differences still exist. According to the 48th report from CNNIC (2021) internet users in rural areas only make up 29.4% of the total users. Although the classification of areas as either 'rural' or 'urban' in China is not entirely clear, the digital divide between rural and urban areas in terms

[10] For a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese cultures of learning, one example is Jin and Cortazzi's work on Cultures of learning.

of internet usage is well documented. In terms of the devices used to access the internet, the 48th report by CNNIC also pointed out that vast majority of internet users (over 99% of the population) use mobile devices. Access via desktop PCs and laptops are reported as 34.6% and 30.8 % respectively (China Internet Network Information Center, 2021).

To better understand the online activities of internet users in China, I cite part of the table published in the 48th CNNIC report showing the top 10 internet applications used (see table 2.2). According to the report, almost all users use instant messaging apps. Furthermore, it can be concluded that the main forms of online activities among Chinese internet are communications (through instant messaging), video streaming, online payments and shopping.

Table2.2 Top 10 online activities of Chinese internet users adopted from CNNIC report (2021)

Applications	Number of Internet users (10,000) Dec. 2020	% of users using the application Dec. 2020	Number of Internet users (10,000) Jun. 2021	% of users using the application Jun. 2021	Growth rate
Instant messaging	98111	99.2%	98330	97.3%	0.2%
Online video (including video clip)	92677	93.7%	94384	93.4%	1.8%
Video clip	87335	88.3%	88775	87.8%	1.6%
Online payment	85434	86.4%	87221	86.3%	2.1%
Online shopping	78241	79.1%	81206	80.3%	3.8%
Search engine	76977	77.8%	79544	78.7%	3.3%
Online news	74274	75.1%	75987	75.2%	2.3%
Online music	65825	66.6%	68098	67.4%	3.5%
Livestreaming	61685	62.4%	63769	63.1%	3.4%
Online games	51793	52.4%	50925	50.4%	-1.7%

The prevalence of internet access in most parts of China, with a significant number of people participating in various online activities, is a relatively recent phenomenon, within the past three decades. The origins of the Internet can be traced back to the 1960s in the United States, where the U.S. Department of Defense developed ARPANET, a network that facilitated communication between multiple computers (Leiner et al., 2009). It was not until 1986 that China established its first computer network, CANET (China Academic Network), which only became accessible to the general public in 1995 (Shao, 2012). Some of the Chinese giant tech companies[11] were also founded in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which may also reflect the start of the Chinese internet. In addition, the Chinese government significantly contributed to the advancement of the internet through the implementation of various policies and initiatives. For example:

> '*as early as 1997, the government formulated the 9th Five-Year Plan for State Informationization and the Long Range Objective for the Year 2010, which included the Internet as part of the national information infrastructure and set the goal of facilitating national economic informationization through rigorous development of the Internet* (Shao, 2012, p. 45).

Consequently, a substantial amount of funding has been allocated towards the progress of the internet in China, leading to its widespread adoption and prevalence in the country today.

However, the construction of internet infrastructure is not the only aspect under the Chinese government's control. The government has been actively pursuing opportunities to exert regulatory control over internet usage since the beginning (Shao, 2012). One notable outcome resulting from government control is the creation of the Great Firewall of China (hereafter Firewall). As the name implies, it bears resemblance to the ancient Great Wall of China, which was constructed to safeguard against invasions. To be more specific, the Firewall was introduced in the 2000s to "block or filter IP addresses, TCP ports, DNS requests, HTTP requests, circumvention tools, and even social networking sites" (Ensafi et al., 2015, p. 61).

As a result, many popular platforms and websites in the western world were banned in China. A few instances encompass all Google platforms, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and numerous others. Moreover, while there may be an array of apps for particular purposes

[11] NetEase was founded in1997; Tencent 1998 and Taobao in 2003

outside of China, there are usually only two versions within China, one for domestic users and one for international users. For example, TikTok's Chinese version--Douyin is especially designed for users in China and operates within the Chinese market, even though TikTok and Douyin are both owned by the same company and share the same underlying technology. Individuals residing in mainland China have no access to TikTok unless they use Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). However, using VPNs poses challenges for ordinary Chinese citizens, as it not only requires technical expertise but is also considered illegal by the government. Shao (2012) argued that the objectives of the Chinese government's regulation of the Internet can be seen as underpinned by good intentions, such as safeguarding the internet, security and preventing data crimes. However, others argue that the Firewall is simply a censorship tool for the government (Deibert & Villeneuve, 2016; Griffiths, 2021). Nevertheless, the implementation of the Firewall has significantly contributed to the distinctive internet environment in China, especially social media. Despite the blocking of mainstream social media platforms of Western countries in China, this does not imply that Chinese individuals abstain from using social media entirely. Instead, social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo and QQ are extremely popular among Chinese people. In the next section, I will focus on the social media landscape, providing a concise overview of the prevailing social media platforms currently popular in China.

2.2.2 Social media landscape in China

According to Statista (2021b), mainland China has the biggest number (1279 million) of social media users in the world. Young adults aged between of 20 to 29, as well as individuals in their 30s, constitute the primary demographic engaging with social media platforms in China, accounting for 19.9% and 20.4% respectively (WeAreSocial, 2021). This is in line with the CNNIC (2021) report that individuals in the age range of 30-39 years old represent the largest segment (20.3%) of internet users in China. Based on these numbers, the primary user demographic for social media platforms in China consists of individuals in their twenties and thirties. Moreover, the China Internet Network Information Center (2017) report noted that almost half of users who use the three main social networking sites (Qzone of QQ, Weibo and Moments*/Pengyouquan* of WeChat) were aged 20-29 years old. Based on these statistics, it can be inferred that the primary users of Chinese social media platforms are likely to be young

adults. In the next section, I will provide a concise overview of the major social media platforms in China.

2.2.2.2 A brief introduction to major social media platforms in China

Despite the unavailability of the mainstream social media platforms used in the West, Chinese social media platforms have experienced significant growth and prosperity in recent decades. These platforms are often regarded as equivalent to their Western counterparts[12]. To gain a better understanding of the Chinese social media landscape, I have grouped popular websites and social media platforms in China according to their primary functions:

- Instant messaging based: WeChat/Weixin, QQ
- Search engine: Baidu is the search engine that most Chinese people use online. It is considered as an equivalent to Google (Fuchs, 2021). Just like Google, Baidu also has a range of sub-products and services. Some examples include: Baidu Tieba (an online community), Baidu Wenku (document sharing), Baidu Ditu (map) and Baidu Baike (online encyclopedia)
- Online Community: Baidu Tieba (Interest based), Zhihu (Q&A format), Hupu (Sports, especially for NBA matches)
- Online shopping platforms: Taobao/Tmall, JD.com
- Online payment: Alipay, WeChat pay
- Microblogging: Weibo, Xiaohongshu/Red
- Video based: Youku, Tudou, iQIYI
- Short video: Douyin, Kuaishou
- Anime/gaming focused: AcFun(A-site) and Bilibili (B-site)
- E-sports/gaming platforms: Huya, Douyu
- Online dating platforms: Tantan, Momo
- Music streaming**:** QQ music, NetEase cloud music, KuGou music

The top three social media platforms in China ranked by monthly active users are: WeChat (1000.24 million), QQ (680.15 million) and Weibo (566 million) (Statista, 2021b). According to Tencent's (who runs WeChat) own financial report, WeChat boasts 1.26 billion monthly active users in September 2021 (Tencent, 2021).

An overview of the primary functionalities offered by the major social media platforms in China is provided below. Participants in this study are highly likely to utilise one or more of these platforms; therefore, comprehending their features will contribute to understanding participants' behaviours.

[12] Such as Weibo for Twitter, WeChat for WhatsApp/Facebook messenger

Wechat/Wexin:

WeChat was first launched in 2011 by Tencent. Initially, it was an instant messaging app with social networking functions such as Moments/Pengyouquan where texts, photos and videos can be posted and contacts can see and interact with one another. Gradually, it became a multi-functional app so that in addition to messaging and traditional social media functions, it is also an important payment method (WeChat pay) for Chinese people. Even mobile street vendors have their WeChat or Alipay QR code on display for their customers. In addition to this, many WeChat users send money to their friends or families via Hongbao/Red pocket Wechat, which is also a way of maintaining social relations. Furthermore, some other functions within WeChat are mini-programmes[13] ; subscription channels and location based services such as finding nearby WeChat users. It is highly versatile and is referred to as a 'super app' in east Asia as it is a 'do-everything platform for everyday cultural and economic activities' (Steinberg, 2020, p. 1).

Weibo:

Weibo is a microblogging platform launched by Sina in 2009 and is considered an equivalent to Twitter. The celebrities, influencers and verified accounts on Webo are often being called 'Big V'. Key features of Weibo include following other users, posting updates, commenting and sharing trending topics. Weibo users are said to have the highest educational level and income compared to WeChat and QQ users (China Internet Network Information Center, 2017).

QQ:

QQ was also launched by Tencent in 1999. Many Chinese people in their 20s-30s can probably relate to 'growing up with QQ'. As one the oldest Chinese social media platforms, many people may also view it as an 'outdated' platform.

[13] see https://walkthechat.com/wechat-mini-programs-simple-introduction/

To summarise, though people in China have limited access to Western social media platforms, equivalent or similar ones are available. At the same time, it is important to recognise that China is not alone in this respect: different regions and countries are likely to have their own preferences when it comes to social media platforms. For instance, very popular social media platforms specific to particular countries include KaKaotalk in South Korea and LINE in Japan (Steinberg, 2020). Studying the social media landscape of each specific context enables a comprehensive understanding of the unique platforms, user behaviors and cultural nuances that shape social media usage within that particular region.

2.3 UK educational context

2.3.1 A brief introduction to UK education system prior to higher education

The United Kingdom is a constitutional monarchy comprising four countries: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Since the devolution of powers Act in 1998, each country has gained autonomy in shaping its education policies and practices.

According to the document published by the Department for Education, the education system is divided into five stages across the UK: early years; primary education; secondary education; further education and higher education (2017). There are differences in some aspects of the education system between different countries in the UK. However, the fundamentals remain the same. For example, all pupils must attend full-time education until the age of 16; this is the legal requirement of compulsory education. At the end of secondary school, most UK pupils sit exams named General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs). GCSEs can be considered a significant milestone in a pupil's academic journey, as they mark the culmination of their compulsory education. Moreover, GCSEs also prepare students with the foundational knowledge they will then use in further education.

After completing GCSEs, students have several pathways to choose from. If a pupil wishes to pursue higher education, such as a university, he or she would probably take Advanced-level (A-level) courses. A-levels provide more specialised and in-depth study in specific subjects and are highly valued by university admissions. Alternatively, the pupil can also choose non-academic pathways such as vocational education and training courses instead of A-levels. Although A-levels are usually considered the main pathway for students going to university,

it is possible to proceed to higher education without A-levels. Some universities may accept other qualifications such as Business and Technology Education Council (BTECs), Access to Higher Education diplomas or International Baccalaureate (IB) certificates, depending on the specific course and institution [14]. However, students who have a vocational education background are inclined to commence their higher education studies at less prestigious universities (Hoelscher et al., 2008).

To summarise, table 2.2. below provides an overview of the UK education system along with key exams/qualifications in the corresponding stages. It should be emphasized that while the table represents a common academic journey, it is not the only route to higher education.

Table 2.2 an example of common UK education pathways prior to higher education

	Stage	School year	Typical Duration	Typical pupil's age	Exams/qualifications	Qualification Level
Early years education			5	0-5 years old		
Primary education	Key stage 1	Year1, 2	2	5-7 years old	-	-
	Key stage 2	Year3, 4, 5, 6	4	7-11 years old	National Curriculum Assessments (SATs)	-
Secondary education	Key stage 3	Year 7,8,9	3	11-14 years old	-	-
	Key stage 4	Year 10, 11	2	14-16 years old	GCSEs	Level 2
Further education	Key stage 5	Year 12, 13	2	16-18 years old	A-levels	Level 3

[14]Sources from UCAS. Accessed from https://www.ucas.com/advisers/guides-teachers/help-your-students-get-uni/entry-requirements-and-alternatives-levels

2.3.2 Higher education in the UK

2.3.2.1 Background information on universities in the UK

In this section, I briefly introduce the university admission process in the UK as this may help to understand the UK participants in this study It is worth noting that students in the UK usually begin their university applications before taking the final year A-levels examinations[15]. During this time, they are expected to research the universities they are interested in applying to, usually with help and guidance from their education providers and tutors. Then they submit their applications through the University and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS). Most undergraduate admissions in the UK are handled through UCAS, including international applicants. The A-level results are a common criterion for university admissions in the UK. However, university admission does not solely rely on student's A-level results; they also consider other elements such as the applicant's personal statement, reference letters, interview performances and volunteering and many more aspects. Depending on the universities or the specific courses, these elements alongside A-levels results are considered differently. After the submission of applications, applicants either receive an unconditional offer, a conditional offer or are rejected by the individual university. For applicants who have received conditional offer, if they meet the conditions on the offer, they can proceed with enrolment. If they don't meet the conditions or haven't received any offers, they enter a process called clearing to explore available places at other universities.

In the school year of 2021-22, a total of 2,182,560 students were studying at 285 UK higher education providers (UniversitiesUK, 2023). According to the Department of Education of the UK government, higher education entry percentage by age 25 (overall) was 47.0% in the academic year of 2020/21 (2023). Moreover, UK has long been a popular destination for international students for higher education: in 2020, according to the HESA (2021) data, approximately 22% of all students were international students (including both EU and Non-EU students). Among them, Chinese students had the highest representation, particularly within full-time postgraduate programmes (HESA, 2021).

[15] This is different from the situation in China, where university applicants usually submit their choices of universities they would like to go after they are aware of their Gaokao results.

In terms of stratification, while there is no three-tier system in the UK, university league tables and rankings are seen as reflecting a university's excellence. There are also official or unofficial ways to refer to groups of universities in the UK, including (but not limited to) the Russell Group universities[16], Pre/Post-1992[17] Universities and Red Brick universities[18].

2.3.2.2 Some issues in UK higher education that relate to this study

UK education is a very broad topic of scholarly interest. In terms of this thesis, the focus is not so much on academic aspects and more on informal aspects of UK higher education and its students. Having said that, I will briefly discuss the UK higher education system in terms of cost to students, student bodies and student life.

During the data collection process in the UK, participants often referred to 'nine grand', 'nine grand a year', as their tuition fee as undergraduate students. Tuition fees vary depending on subject area and whether or not one is an international student. Most students rely on a student loan to cover tuition fees and/or living expenses. Paying such significant amounts of money every year, many students have high expectations of their higher education experience. In a study focusing on undergraduate students' expectations of higher education) one participant commented that "I'd be expecting caviar in lectures and stuff like that" (Bates & Kaye, 2014, p.668). A recent study (Bunce et al., 2023) pointed out that higher education students in the global north, including countries like the UK, have become consumers. Though this study did not address student finance or the marketisation of higher education, it is useful to consider how my participants experience higher education in this broader context.

UK HE has a global reputation and is home to several prestigious universities such as the University of Cambridge and University of Oxford. As such, it attracts international students from all over the world. As mentioned in the last section, in 2020, approximately 22% of the HE student bodies in the UK were international students (HESA, 2021). My own student experience reflects this: studying in a UK higher education institution, I have met with people

[16] The Russell Group is a self-selected association of 24 leading research-intensive universities in the UK. These universities are known for their research output and academic excellence.
[17] This refers to the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 in the UK. The term is used to differentiate between universities in the UK based on their establishment dates.
[18] The term "Red Brick Universities" refers to universities in the UK that were established in major industrial cities during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The name "Red Brick" symbolises the distinctive architectural style of these universities.

from different cultural backgrounds and nationalities; as an undergraduate in China, I only encountered other domestic students. Although ethnicities or nationalities are not the main concern of this study, it is helpful to consider that while participants in China are more than likely to be Chinese, participants in the UK could be domestic or international students.

In addition, for many first-year undergraduate students, going to university marks their first experience of living away from their parents. While some students may choose to live on campus (especially first year undergraduates), others choose to live off-campus through private renting[19]. The prevalence of student private renting in the UK has led to an increasing number of purpose-built student accommodation. This has been observed to impact the housing market and urban planning in university towns (Hubbard, 2009).

As in many parts of the world, attending university is a significant milestone in one's lives. It is a period often marked by change, transformation and growth. The transition to university can be stressful for first year students. In this regard, research has suggested that social media is a useful tool for university students and more and more students in the UK use social media to help them to traverse this transition period (Thomas et al., 2020). The value of social media can be seen in other aspects of university life. While a range of extracurricular activities, clubs, and societies offer students the chance to meet like-minded people and engage in various academic or non-academic activities and events, social media has a central role as a communication tool in organising and facilitating social life at university.

2.4 Internet and social media use in the UK

2.4.1 Overview of the internet usage

In the UK, the internet only became accessible to the general public in the 2000s. Over the past two decades, UK has witnessed a remarkable growth in terms of the prevalence and accessibility of internet services. According to the Oxford Internet Institute, in the year 2000, only one third of the population across the UK had access to the Internet (Dutton & Helsper, 2007). In 2020, 96% of households had access to the internet (Office for National Statistics).

[19] The housing subject was inspired by focus group data where the participants discussed the internet connection in their rented student houses.

In 2023, the number of internet users in the UK is estimated to be around 64.08 million, representing over 95% of the total population in the UK (Statista, 2023). In fact, the UK boasts one of the highest internet access penetration rates globally, securing the third position (Statista, 2021a). Thus, almost the entire population of the UK utilises the internet in some capacity.

While regional differences in internet usage exist within the UK, they are not as pronounced as the disparities observed in a country like China. As mentioned in previous sections, in China, there are significant variations in internet access and usage rates between regions, particularly between urban and rural areas. Rates are broadly similar between the four nations, from 93% in England and Scotland, to 90 % in Wales and 88% in Northern Ireland (Ofcom, 2021b). While there may be variations in internet infrastructure and access speeds between different regions, overall access to the internet is established across the regions.

In terms of accessing the internet, as in China, smartphones have become the preferred device, with approximately 85% of internet users using smartphones for this purpose (Ofcom, 2021a). This trend also reflects an increasing reliance on mobile technology (apps) and the convenience it offers in terms of accessing online content, social media, communication and various services.

In terms of internet services in the UK, there are three primary providers: Alphabet, Meta and Amazon. According to the Ofcom (2022), nearly all adult internet users in the UK use services provided by two companies, Alphabet and Meta and in third place, Amazon also has at least 90% usage rate (Ofcom, 2022). As highlighted in the Ofcom report, the two companies, Alphabet and Meta, have a portfolio of influential platforms that enjoy extensive usage among users. Alphabet is the parent company of Google and YouTube, while Meta is the parent company of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Amazon is known for its e-commerce platform and streaming services. Between them, these three companies effectively meet the majority of the needs of adult internet users in the UK, with their diverse range of services and platforms, including search engines, social media, e-commerce, instant-messaging, content streaming, cloud-based services and many more. In the next section, I describe the social media landscape in the UK with the main platforms and trends.

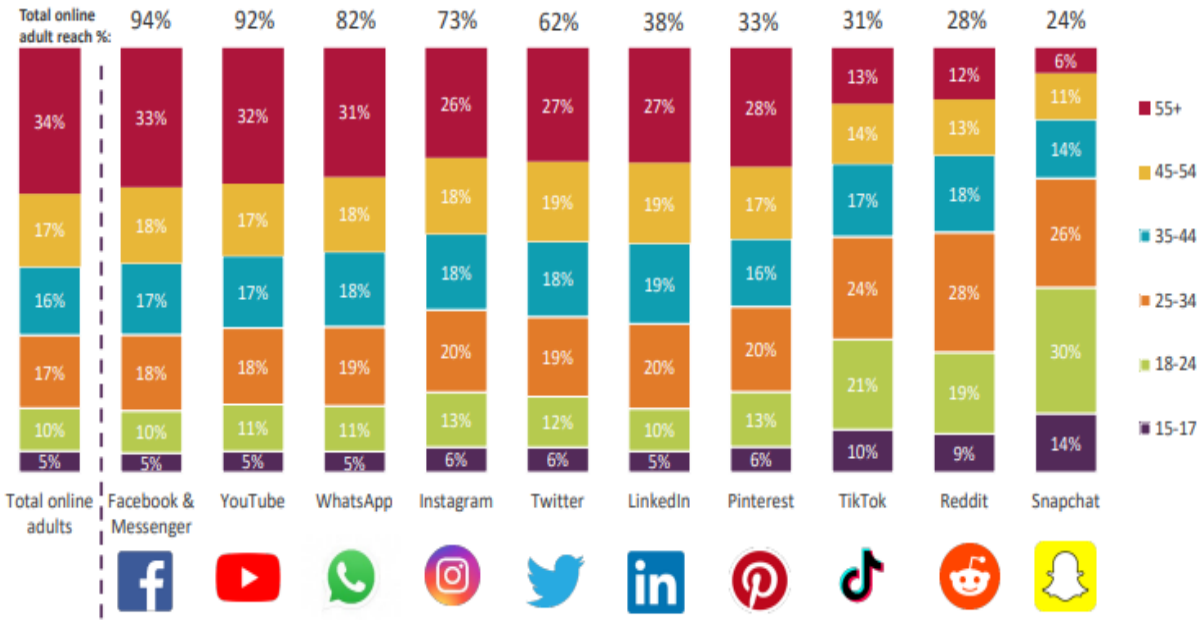
2.4.2 Social media usage in the UK

A significant component of online activities of internet users in the UK comprises social media platforms. According to Ofcom (2019a, p. 8), 'around 70% of UK adults have a social media account and about one in every five minutes spent online is on social media'. The main social media platforms in the UK are Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. The popularity of these social media platforms varies depending on perspective or angle. For example, when analysing internet usage in the UK, it was discovered that most adult internet users use services provided by Alphabet, Meta and Amazon (Ofcom, 2022). However, when examining the population aged 15 and above, the top three organisations people spent most time with are Alphabet, Meta and Bytedance (Ipsos, 2021). This may because audience reach does not necessarily align with the actual time spent by the audience because the level of active involvement or attention of each platform is different. TikTok (owned by Bytedance), a short video-based platform, certainly requires more time and attention from online shoppers on Amazon.

What is more, different platforms can attract different groups of users. The Ofcom (2022) report showed that there are differences between age groups in terms of the popular social media platforms (see figure 2.1. for extract).

Figure 2.1 Ofcom (2022) online nation report on top 10 social media platforms

Figure 2.8: Top ten social media platforms by UK adult reach, adult audience composition by age: September 2021



From the figure above we can see that Snapchat, TikTok and Reddit attracts more teenager users while Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp are more popular among the older generation. Research has also suggested that users are different on each platform. For example, Blank and Lutz's (2017) study of six major social media platforms in the UK revealed that factors like age, gender, income and education are influential when it comes to the adoption of individual platforms. This suggests that demographics may have an impact on preferences regarding the use of particular social media platforms, depending on factors such as age and socioeconomic status. Additionally, the popularity and usage of social media platforms may evolve over time. Taking TikTok as an example, it exploded in 2020 when most parts of the worlds were under lockdown (Ofcom, 2020). Prior to Covid-19 pandemic, internet usage in the UK was increasingly centred around videos, with YouTube being the dominant platform for video content (Ofcom, 2019b).

Given central role of the internet and the widespread use of social media platforms in the UK, there is increasing concern regarding the safety and potential risks that users may encounter

on these platforms. Indeed, people's experience with the internet is not always positive, with many individuals encountering negative or harmful experiences online. Many recent reports on internet use in the UK have focused on negative aspects of internet use. For example, perceived threats to privacy online (Blank and Dutton, 2019), misinformation (Ofcom, 2021b) and the need to identify advertising on Google and biased websites (Ofcom, 2021a). Additionally, social media use has been associated with mental health problems, especially among teenage girls (Kelly et al., 2018). The internet (including social media platforms), while offering numerous benefits and opportunities, also poses various risks and challenges.

2.5 Chapter summary

This context chapter has focused on two aspects of the research in the two research sites, China and the UK: education and technology (social media and the internet).

The common academic journey for participants of this study is in China: nine-year compulsory education from the age of six, three years of senior secondary education with *Zhongkao* and *Gaokao* in between. In the UK, a typical academic journey involves mandatory education from the ages of 5 to 16, followed by GCSE. Following this, students have the option to pursue further education at a college or sixth form for two years, where they typically study A-levels or vocational courses before proceeding to higher education, such as university. The educational systems in the two countries are markedly different. In particular, higher education in China is characterised by a significant level of state control, various examinations and Chinese learning culture. Issues such as student fees and student life in UK higher education were discussed.

In terms of internet and social media use, people in China and UK have relatively good internet infrastructure, though there are regional differences, particularly in China. The use of social media is prevalent among people in both countries, especially among young people. China ‘s social media landscape is characterised by the presence of the Firewall which effectively blocks nearly all major Western social media platforms. As a result, most people in China use Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat, QQ and Weibo. In the UK, internet services are mainly provided by three companies: Alphabet, Meta and Amazon. These contextual factors may play a role in the participants' experiences and practices when it comes to social media used for learning (see chapters five and six). For example, participants in China have

mainly been found to use Chinese social media platforms which could be due to the existence of the Firewall.

Due to the unique characteristics of these two countries regarding their educational systems and technological landscapes, I argue that the context would likely to impact the way university students engage with social media for learning. With this in mind, when analysing the results, it worth taking into the account of the specific context in which the participants are situated.

Chapter 3 Literature review

3.1 Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to introduce the theoretical concepts alongside the empirical research that I found useful for my research project. This project set out to explore the role of social media in learning in the higher education context. With this in mind, I decided to focus on the literature in relation to learning theories, higher education and social media research. The current chapter is therefore divided into three main sections. In the first section, theories and concepts around learning are reviewed in order to ground the philosophical debates in particular understandings of learning. Then, I review existing research and key arguments about student experiences in the higher education context in the second section. The third section focuses on social media research, including definitions of social media and empirical studies on learning with social media (and border--digital technology). Together, this literature review sheds light on the intersection between technology and learning, particularly in the higher education context.

3.2 Learning theories and concepts

3.2.1 Connectivism—the best theory for learning in the digital age?

3.2.1.1What is connectivism?

As we advance into the 21st century, technological advancements and innovations have proliferated. The Internet has become increasingly accessible to people and impacts our daily lives. The three mainstream learning theories discussed in the last section were formed prior to the extensive adoption of the Internet and related technological advancements. Therefore, Siemens (2005a) argued that a new learning theory was required to specifically address the influence of technology on the learning process. Connectivism, a learning theory that is said to be for the digital age, was proposed by Siemens (2005a) and Downes (2005).

Connectivism proposes eight principles outlined by Siemens (2005a) that collectively define its view on learning and knowledge acquisition in the digital age. Each principle plays a distinct role in shaping the philosophy and practices of connectivism:

1. *Learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions.*
2. *Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources.*
3. *Learning may reside in non-human appliances.*
4. *Capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known.*

5. *Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning.*
6. *Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.*
7. *Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities.*
8. *Decision-making is itself a learning process. (Siemens, 2005a, p.7.)*

Connectivists tend to use the metaphor of a network and its interconnected nodes to represent the learning process (as we can see from the second principle above). The idea of the network in connectivism "consists of two or more nodes linked in order to share resources" whilst the node is "a connection point to a larger network" (Siemens, 2005c, p. 22). Therefore, a network in connectivism requires at least two elements: nodes and connections (Siemens, 2005b). It worth noting that a node does not have to be a person. Nodes can be anything we encounter or experience (Siemens, 2005b). A node can be understood as any resource, person, or information that a learner can connect with in a networked learning environment. For example, in the context of learning in the digital age, individuals, databases, websites or any other source of information can be considered as nodes. Another key concept in connectivism is the idea of "connective knowledge" (Downes, 2012) which refers to the understanding that knowledge is created by interactions with individuals who are linked to various networks and therefore, that knowledge is distributed across networks and connections.

Connectivism's view of learning can be summarised as learning as the network creation. In other words, learning occurs when individuals engage in forming and nurturing connections within networks. Connectivism is a learning theory that emphasises the role of forming connections in the learning process. It promotes the idea that knowledge exists in the numerous connections between networks and that the learner should focus on developing skills to discover, assess and utilise knowledge when needed. Downes (2007) concluded that connectivism proposes "the thesis that knowledge is distributed across a network of connections, and therefore that learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks" (para.2). As such, network creation and connective knowledge together are the two key concepts in understanding what is connectivism.

3.2.1.2 Applications of connectivism

In terms of application, connectivism has been seen associated with the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). According to Herlo (2017), one of the first examples of MOOC was from a course taught by the creators of connectivism in 2008: during their courses they introduced the principles of connectivism and encouraged open participation. Siemens and Downes' approach for MOOC, also referred to as Connectivist Massive Open Online Courses (cMOOCs) (Clarà & Barberà, 2013) is rooted in the principles of connectivism, emphasising the importance of building connections, networks and interactions among learners, resources, and information sources. Compared to other types of MOOCs, cMOOCs is more learner-focused on that participants are invited to collaboratively discover and generate new knowledge (Wang et al., 2018).

Other than MOOCs and cMOOCs, connectivism has also been associated with various kinds of digital technologies. For example, Utecht and Keller (2019) provided illustrations of specific types of educational technologies and platforms that can be implemented in both K-12 and higher education, according to each principle of connectivism. Their paper presented the potential positive outcomes of connectivism theoretically, but their suggestions await the support of empirical testing.

In addition, many empirical studies conclude that the use of social media for learning is well-supported by connectivism. Flynn et al. (2015) found that the medical educator's use of social media can be traced to learning theories such as connectivism. In another study, using a Connectivist learning model, Bharucha (2018) explored Indian higher education students' use of social media for educational purposes. He argued that connectivism is the learning theory for today's digital India. More recently, the outbreak of COVID-19 compelled numerous educational endeavours to shift towards online formats. In light of this situation, a significant number of researchers and academics have advocated the relevance of connectivism in studying learning with technology (see Al-Mutairi & Mubayrik, 2021; Boyraz & Ocak, 2021; Ulla & Perales, 2021). Thus, we can see that although relatively new, connectivism has gained significant attention in academia and has been discussed and tested in empirical studies, particularly in the context of learning with technology.

3.2.1.3 Critiques and issues with connectivism

Introduced as a successor to previous learning theories, connectivism has faced its share of criticisms. Some people argue that there is nothing new in connectivism and that the older learning theories are still relevant today. For example, Goldie (2016) points out that despite connectivism's claim to be a novel theory for network learning, its foundational principles can be traced back to traditional theories such as constructivism. Some even question its status as a learning theory. Kop and Hill (2008), for example, argue that connectivism's contributions to the new paradigm are not significant enough to be classified as an independent learning theory. Bell (2011) concurred that connectivism is not a theory as such but more of a phenomenon as it only contributes to describing the phenomenon of learning.

In terms of connectivism as a theoretical framework for empirical research, Goldie (2016) argues that connectivism alone is not sufficient to explain learning in a web-2.0 environment or any other environment (Clarà & Barberà, 2013). While some critics may perceive connectivism's contribute to a paradigm shift in research or pedagogy as insignificant, I found it to be useful for my research topic. In particular, the connectivist viewpoint asserts that knowledge can exist outside of human beings; learning takes place through the establishment of connections among nodes; its emphasis on individuals' competence in navigating and effectively utilising accessible resources and networks relates well to my investigation of social media platforms. All these views appear to be in strong alignment with the focus of my research and I will elaborate these further in the next section.

3.2.1.4 Connectivism in relation to my research

The connectivist view of learning is useful for my research because it helps to understand the role of social media in students' learning. One important aspect of connectivism is that internet resources, including social media platforms, can be considered as essential components within learners' expansive networks for acquiring knowledge. In connectivism, learning is non-linear and dynamic: learning occurs when individuals interact with a network of resources, people and information to construct knowledge. This is different from other learning theories: behaviourism views learning as a process of acquiring new behaviours through stimulus-response models, and thus posits a linear learning model; cognitivism views learning as a process of internalising and processing information while in social constructivism

guided interaction and scaffolding provided by knowledgeable others are central to the learning process. Connectivism recognises the role of technology and digital networks, including social media platforms and websites, as tools for knowledge acquisition and learning. Not only was it introduced as a learning theory for the digital age, but it also acknowledges that "learning may reside in non-human appliances" in its principles (as cited in 3.2.1.1). Connectivism therefore allows me to explain how participants access social media platforms/sites for learning purposes as it acknowledges that learners can tap into the wealth of learning by access the information available on the internet; engage with online communities; follow social media accounts; and use various online platforms to access, share and co-create knowledge.

Connectivism also emphasises individual autonomy, which is relevant for my research given that my focus is on how individual university student use social media for learning. Unlike in social constructivism where social interactions are emphasised, connectivism places a greater emphasis on the individual's capacity to navigate, filter and utilise a network of nodes. Although utilising social media to connect with others may be seen to align with social constructivism, Vygotsky's (1978) concepts of zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding are not so relevant as they connect learning to learners' previous knowledge and posit the need for more knowledgeable others. Connectivism's strong focus on the learner's role signals the changing roles of learners and educators in a digital age. This is especially relevant in my research of the higher education context where university students tend to utilise social media for learning more than of instead of relying on their teachers for knowledge.

Last but not least, Connectivism is appropriate for this study in which I examine learning in two different contexts (see 3.2.2). From a Connectivist perspective, learning takes place through diverse channels, encompassing both formal and informal methods. Moreover, learners have the ability to establish connections with individuals outside the confines of formal institutions. The principles of connectivism can be applied in different learning contexts such as formal, informal and non-formal learning. Many scholars have advocated or adopted a Connectivist approach to learning to examine formal and informal learning. For example, Haugsbakken and Langseth's (2014) empirical research of YouTube videos has linked to aspects of connectivism to explain students' connections to informal and formal contexts.

Theoretically, Greenhow and Lewin (2016) draw partially on connectivism to conceptualise social media as a learning space with a mix of formal and informal learning attributes.

In short, Connectivism as a learning theory resonates with my research and is therefore a central part of my theoretical framework.

3.2.2 Formal, informal and non-formal learning

3.2.2.1 Debates around different types of learning

In examining how university students use social media for learning in various settings from formal education to their everyday lives, I decided to examine the concepts of formal, informal and non-formal learning as they are helpful for my research. Marsick and Watkins define these different types of learning as follows:

> *Formal learning is typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured. Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but it is not typically classroom-based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner. Incidental learning is defined as a byproduct of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the organizational culture, trial-and-error experimentation, or even formal learning. Informal learning can be deliberately encouraged by an organization or it can take place despite an environment not highly conducive to learning. Incidental learning, on the other hand, almost always takes place although people are not always conscious of it.*
>
> *(Marsick and Watkins,1990, p. 12. as cited in Marsick and Watkins, 2001)*.

Their definition, especially regarding "informal learning", seems to suggest that informal learning can happen regardless of whether the environment is designed for learning. This can be linked into my work as I explore the learning that happens sometimes incidentally, on social media apps and platforms.

UNESCO also give a clear presentation in terms of formal, informal and non-formal definitions:

> *Formal learning: Formal learning occurs as a result of experiences in an education or training institution, with structured learning objectives, learning time and support which leads to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.*
>
> *Non-formal learning: Non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in*

terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.

Informal learning: Informal learning results from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (UNESCO 2009 p.27).

Based on UNESCO's (2009) definitions, formal learning refers to the learning received from formal institutions with clear goals and under the guidance of the instructor, such as learning from a lecture in a university; the learner is aware of the learning activities. An example of formal learning could be the university students attending a lecture. Non-formal learning on the other hand, is not led by the teacher or the school but still has some structure and the learner is aware of engaging in a learning activity. One example could be university students gathering together in order to discuss coursework. In other words, non-formal learning can happen in a formal learning setting. Finally, informal learning is totally unstructured and unplanned and usually occurs unintentionally. For example, first-year students may pick up the acronym of teaching buildings gradually when they are studying on campus without even intentionally trying to memorise them. In conclusion, it seems that there are several key points to differentiate these three learning types, which are: if it leads to certification, if it is structured and if it is intentional or not.

Many scholars point out, however, that the three kinds of learning are complex and somewhat slippery due to a lack of consensus regarding their definitions (Stefton-Green,2003; Charania &Lewin, 2018). In particular, informal learning is usually used loosely and is often used interchangeably with non-formal learning (Malcom et al., 2003). Consequently, confusions can arise when examining empirical studies that employ these terms. Significant empirical studies do not problematise formal/informal learning. They either do not provide an explicit definition of formal learning, informal learning and non-formal learning or they simply address them as "in and out of school learning" (e.g., Cain & Policastri, 2011; Chen & Bryer, 2012; Mao, 2014). The distinction between formal and informal learning based on its location may seem reasonable at first glance as it seems to cover most learning experiences. However, it is problematic in that it simply categorises learning based on location: whether it happened in or out of school. Firstly, it remains unclear whether this "school" refer to a physical school (with campus) or a virtual school. Moreover, nowadays, digital technologies

provide learners with many new opportunities: formal schools/educational institutions are no longer the only outlets of knowledge. Learners do not even have to physically attend a school, as it can happen anywhere. Simply relying on whether the learning takes place in a 'formal school setting' is therefore highly problematic.

In addition to location, the purpose of learning is often used to distinguish different types of learning. Some suggest that informal learning is a part of leisure activities rather than for examination purpose (Sefton-Green, 2004). For instance, Greenhow and Robelia (2009) studied how high school students from low-income families use social network sites for informal learning and identity formation. They described informal learning as "spontaneous, experiential and unplanned" in contrast to non-formal learning as "where one has certain objectives in mind and actively seeks information from sources that may include peers, mentors, or media" (p.122). Instead of stressing the location, they focus on whether the learning occurred intentionally or not, whether the learner had purposefully planned the learning activity or not. Alternatively, Czerkawski (2016) combines differences in location and purpose when discussing the definition of formal and informal learning. Formal learning is described as involving structured, pre-designed learning activities supported by an instructor, usually within an educational institution and leading to a degree. By contrast, informal learning is unstructured and incidental, usually occurs outside the classroom and is not linked to formal assessment. However, when it comes to the online learning environment, Czerkawski (2016) argues that it is unrealistic to define formal and informal learning and is better to focus on other aspects such as the affordances of the technology, to create better learning designs. This might explain why some empirical studies on digital technologies and learning do not offer a comprehensive discussion of formal, informal and formal learning, focusing instead on other aspects of the technology.

So far, formal education/learning is generally associated with a formal institution/school which usually consists of hierarchy-like classes, an instructor and a curriculum. Informal and non-formal learning, by contrast, tend to be associated with learning that occurs outside formal schooling. However, opinions vary in relation to how these two types of learning differ. Given this lack of consensus, I adopt UNESCO's (2009) definition of formal, informal and non-formal learning as a guide for this study.

3.2.2.2 Relationships between formal, informal and non-formal learning

While the literature attempts to distinguish between the three types of learning, they also influence one another. For example, Rogers (2014) noted informal learning can strengthen formal/non-formal learning and formal/non-formal learning can make learners recognise and validate their unconscious informal learning. In essence, these three forms of learning are not superior to one or other but rather, can complement one another. Rogers (2014) compares formal, informal and non-formal learning to the shape of an iceberg: the tip of the iceberg is formal learning, the middle is non-formal learning and the base of the iceberg, which is hidden under the water, is informal learning. This metaphor is also used by Coffield (2000) who proposes that formal learning is like the surface above the water of an iceberg with most of the iceberg (informal learning) submerged. Whilst learning may be generally associated with formal education as it is the most visible, like the tip pf the iceberg, the majority of learning actually happens in informal everyday learning, just like the base of the iceberg that is hidden under the water.

Over a decade ago, Bull et al. (2008) called for linking the informal learning occurring on participatory media to formal school learning. Many empirical studies conducted since then, have also focused on digital technologies in terms of bridging formal and informal learning contexts (e.g.Chen & Bryer, 2012; Czerkawski, 2016; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). They seem to suggest that digital technologies such as social media have the potential to bridge formal and informal learning. With the proliferation of technology, the boundaries between formal and informal learning settings seem to be becoming increasingly blurred. Hence, a number of scholars and researchers have argued that formal and informal attributes are needed to describe learning environments, rather than drawing a distinct line between them.

Malcolm et al. (2003) proposed that all forms of learning have formal and informal attributes. Adapting this to their research, Greenhow and Lewin (2016) have developed a model of learning attributes that include formal, informal and social media attributes. Rather than separating learning into different categories, they look at formal, informal and non-formal learning with formal and informal attributes.

Illeris (2007, 2016) has argued that divisions between formal, non-formal and informal learning are problematic and do not concern learning itself but the context of learning.

Therefore, he did not include the concept formal or informal learning in his books on learning as a learning typology. I would argue that context is important, and that learning is not the same in different contexts. Even if the topic is the same, learning occurring in the traditional classroom and learning outside the classroom is different: different contexts provide new chances and challenges when it comes to learning. Moreover, the learner might behave differently in different settings. For instance, in everyday life one learns things that one would never learn in formal education. In my research about university students' use of social media for learning, I am interested to see if social media can bridge the gap between formal education and informal/non-formal learning.

3.2.2.3 Beyond formal, informal and non-formal learning

Moving on from the focus on formal, informal and non-formal learning, a growing body of literature has turned its attention to learning, media and technology. The concept of "learning lives" (Erstad, 2012; Erstad et al., 2009; Erstad & Sefton-Green, 2013; Sefton-Green & Erstad, 2017) and "connected learning" (Ito et al., 2013; Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2014), suggest that learning should be viewed as a continuum rather than a dichotomous typology.

As discussed in previous sections, with the increase in the use of digital technologies across multiple learning environments, the boundaries between formal, informal and non-formal learning have become blurred. Hence, there is a need to revisit young people's learning in the light of these changes. The term learning lives, coined by Biesta et al. (2008), refers to the "coherence between learning, identity and agency in the individual, framed by a biographical approach which studies peoples' learning trajectories over their life course" (Erstad et al., 2013, p. 92). Inspired by Biesta et al.'s (2008) use of the 'learning lives' approach to adult learning, Erstad et al., (2009) used the term in the context of three research projects focusing on Norwegian young people's learning. Instead of focusing on the differences in the learning happening inside or outside the school or arguing which type of learning is of greater importance, they take a holistic approach to viewing learning as it unfolds in everyday life as young people "travel" across different contexts.

Erstad (2012) has argued that young people spend most of their time at schools and consuming media; the learning lives approach is able to bridge the gap between these two aspects. Traditionally learning and media have been approached as two separate subjects,

however whereas learners today (in their regard, young people) cross contexts and locations, especially with the use of digital technologies and digital media. Therefore, Erstad (2012) has proposed the learning lives approach as a lens through which to study youth, new media and learning. This holistic aspect is further highlighted in Ito et al.'s (2010) study about the role of digital media in the environment of young people today in the US, describing it as media ecologies.

The learning lives perspective seems to offer a new way of examining young people's learning, especially in relation to the new media and digital technologies. However, implementing the learning lives approach also poses some challenges to researchers. First of all, there is the challenge of capturing the "traversal" between contexts (Sefton-Green and Erstad, 2017): one of the challenges of the learning lives perspective is how researchers can grasp, theorise and describe the learning that happens in everyday life that crosses contexts. It could be difficult, especially methodologically, to follow the learners and capture their learning trajectories. Perhaps this is the reason why most empirical studies that adopt the approach are ethnographic in orientation (e.g.Erstad et al., 2013; Erstad et al., 2009; Gil & Erstad, 2018). Secondly, existing literature has mainly focused on young people in Nordic countries. There is limited research done in other parts of the world using the "learning lives perspective". This could be simply that the main promoters of this approach are researchers residing in those countries. In addition, the learning lives perspective is still relatively new. My research which looks at university students' actual use of social media in different contexts was also inspired by their approach that highlighted the aspects of "traversal between contexts".

Another research agenda I review here is the notion of "connected learning" (Ito et al., 2013; Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2014). As with the learning lives approach, this approach also focuses on digital media and young people's learning. According to Ito et al. (2013), connected learning "advocates for broadened access to learning that is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity" and "is realized when a young person is able to pursue a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults, and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career success or civic engagement" (p.3). As the name suggests, connected learning seems to fill in the gap between in- and out- school learning by focusing on young people's use of digital media.

When it comes to research that adopts connected learning as a lens, similar methodological challenges arise, namely that is hard to capture the dynamic nature of how young people make connections (Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2014). Thus, the notion of connected learning might be refreshing but might also be too abstract to study. Empirical studies may also have to take an ethnographic route to examine individual learning activities. Additionally, although Ito et al. (2013) state that connected learning is not limited to specific social or cultural contexts such as the US or UK (since their research was conducted in these two countries), it might be more relevant to regions that have a similar background to these countries.

However, these two approaches of learning lives and connected learning are not seemed to the most relevant for this study. This is because this study's participants are current university students, however, most of their empirical studies were done with young people (i.e., Gil & Erstad, 2018 study with primary school students), and did not reflect how the higher education environment might affect their learning experiences. Therefore, I did not adopt the lens of connected learning or learning lives for this study.

3.2.2.4 Final verdict: the use of formal, informal and non-formal in this study

I have shown that the terms formal, informal and non-formal learning are defined and used in different ways and that boundaries between them are blurred. This is particularly the case when it comes to the use of technology for learning. In this research, I opted for the UNESCO (2009) framework defining formal, informal, and non-formal learning as part of the conceptual framework for investigating the "learning" dimension in my research.

3.2.3 From Learning Theories to Networked Societies

In the previous section, Connectivism (Siemens, 2005; Downes, 2012) was introduced as an important part of the theoretical framework, offering a lens through which learning can be understood as occurring within distributed networks, with knowledge residing across connections rather than solely within individuals. This perspective is particularly useful for analysing university students' engagement with social media across the different domains of formal, informal, and non-formal learning (UNESCO, 2009). While connectivism helps to identify what counts as learning in this study, it does not fully account for the broader societal

contexts in which these practices are situated. Since social media use is inherently embedded in social, cultural, and technological contexts (as discussed in chapter two)—it is important to also consider theoretical perspectives that highlight these dimensions. In this regard, two complementary media theories are reviewed in the following sections: Manuel Castells' Network Society and Barry Wellman's Networked Individualism.

3.2.3.1Castells' Network Society

Castells defines the Network Society as "a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies" (Castells, 2004, p. 3). These networks, enabled by microelectronics and the internet, have become the dominant mode of social organisation, reconfiguring economies, politics, culture, and education. There are some distinct features in Castells' (1996, 2000, 2004) theorisation of the Network Society that could help to understand how digital technologies reshape social life. Firstly, he introduces the concept of space of flows, which refers to the new spatial logic in which information, communication, and capital circulate globally, transcending traditional geographical and institutional boundaries (Castells, 1996). Secondly, he put forward the notion of timeless time, whereby digital communication reorganises temporal patterns, enabling asynchronous, continuous, and fragmented interactions (Castells, 2000). Thirdly, He illustrates networks as flexible and adaptive structures, capable of decentralisation and constant reconfiguration in response to social, cultural, and technological change (Castells, 2004). Finally, he argues that information becomes the core resource of this new society, central to productivity, power, and identity formation (Castells, 1996, 1997). These features are particularly useful for this study in understanding university students' engagement with social media, as they highlight how learning practices are embedded in wider socio-technical transformations that could blur traditional boundaries of time, space, and social organisation. In other words, social media exemplifies the Network Society by enabling flows of information and relationships across local, national, and global scales. University students' use of social media platforms such as WeChat, WhatsApp, TikTok, or Instagram reflects this embeddedness in global networks, where boundaries between personal, social, and academic life are increasingly vague.

Castells' framework also received some criticism. Recent scholarship points to important limitations of this perspective. Castells tends to emphasise the utility of connectivity and decentralisation of knowledge, yet such processes also generate new challenges, including the spread of misinformation and the emergence of fragmented "silos" of information. For example, Abidin (2021) describes the shift from the early internet Castells was discussing to a "refracted" internet that allows silosociality and transcience. Moreover, Castells himself now adopts a more critical stance in his latest reflection on the Network Society (2022). He acknowledges that his previous framing—centered on connectivity and decentralised knowledge—now requires recalibration in light of accelerated digital transformations and their unintended consequences. In particular, Castells (2022) warns that social media is turning dark for spreading fake news and surveillance tool for tech companies. This shift calls for a deeper examination of not just how connections are formed in networked environments, but also the quality and consequences of those connections—particularly for young people navigating learning through social media. In the context of higher education, where structured knowledge and institutional authority persist, the chaotic dynamics of algorithm-driven silos and epistemic polarisation may disrupt students' ability to engage meaningfully with learning networks. With this in mind, this study explores not only how connections are made, but the value of these connections for young people, and what sorts of frictions are created by their access to this 'networked society' whilst higher education institutions might be structured around different sources of knowledge. In particular, tensions may arise when students' everyday access to networked forms of knowledge sits uneasily alongside the more formalised, hierarchical structures of higher education institutions.

3.2.3.2Wellman's Networked Individualism

While Castells' concept of the network society, reviewed in the previous section, highlights macro-level structural transformations, Barry Wellman approaches similar issues from a micro angle. Wellman (2001, 2002) conceptualises networked individualism as a shift from group-based social organisation to personalised, ego-centred networks. In old times, people usually live and work within fixed, bounded communities—families, neighbourhoods, workplaces, or classrooms—where most interactions occurred within stable, overlapping groups. Wellman (2001) then argues that in the digital age, individuals has become the

operators of their own networks, connecting across multiple, loosely tied, and constantly shifting sets of relationships. In my opinion, network individualism is a theory that highlights the agency of individuals in actively constructing and navigating their own social networks. In relevance of this study, university students decide which social media platforms to use, which contacts to maintain, and how much time and energy to devote to different relationships with communications supported by these platforms. As Rainie and Wellman (2012) describes we now live in a world of networked individuals, where people are "no longer tightly bound in little boxes, but are networked as individuals" (p. 7).

A particularly valuable component of networked individualism for this study is the distinction between strong and weak ties, first introduced by Granovetter (1973) and elaborated in Wellman's work, strong ties refer to close, emotionally intense, and enduring relationships such family, close friends; Weak ties, by contrast, are more casual, less emotionally intense, and less frequent connections, such as acquaintances or participants in large online communities. Wellman's networked individualism shows individuals mobilise both strong and weak ties across platforms and contexts. Rainie and Wellman (2012) argue that in today's society, individuals function as managers of their own networks, drawing on diverse connections for different aspects of their lives. Their research shows that people maintain a variety of ties—close family and friends for social support, colleagues for professional collaboration, and broader online communities for information exchange. This framing has been influential in understanding how social media enables individuals to span different domains simultaneously, reflecting the blurred boundaries between personal, social, and professional life. For example, Veletsianos and Navarrete (2012) study found that learners in online environments often relied on weak ties for exposure to diverse perspectives and access to resources beyond their immediate networks.

While networked individualism provides powerful insights into the micro-level organisation of social life, it is not without limitations. Critics argue that the emphasis on individual agency may obscure the role of structural inequalities and platform power. For instance, van Dijk (2020) pointed out that while individuals may appear to manage their own networks, in fact, their opportunities for connection are often manipulated by algorithms, platform design, and socio-economic factors. The optimistic framing of networked individualism as empowering

has been critiqued for its underestimating issues such as digital surveillance, data commodification, and digital divides (Fuchs, 2021).

For the context of this study, such critiques are particularly relevant. Students in China and the UK operate within very different social media landscapes. For instance, WeChat may be the most popular platform in China whilst WhatsApp in the UK—and these platforms are embedded within distinct political, cultural, and institutional systems. Thus, while students may exhibit agency in forming their personal learning networks, the nature of their connections is shaped by wider contexts and practical issues. However, I can still use networked individualism—especially the way it integrates strong and weak ties—to analyse how students curate their learning networks on social media with family members, classmates or distant peers on online communities. In particular, I found this theory resonates with Siemens' (2005) theory of connectivism, which frames learning as the ability to make and navigate connections across nodes. Networked individualism complements this by showing who those nodes are and how individuals choose to maintain them. Moreover, combing Castells' (2000, 2004) macro perspective of the network society with Wellman's micro-level focus ensures that both structural and individual dimensions are considered.

3.2.3.3 Summary of the theoretical framework of this study

Together with connectivism and the concepts of formal, informal, and non-formal learning, Networked society and Networked individualism provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for this study. To summarise, this study integrates three major theoretical perspectives and adopts UNESCO (2009) definition for different types of learning. In particular, Connectivism explains how knowledge and learning practices emerge from digital networks and helps me to identify what counts as learning in this study; the formal/informal/non-formal distinction categorises the contexts in which these practices occur. Castells' Network society theory adds a macro-level understanding of how social media use reflects broader transformations of time, space, and power in the network society. Network individualism contributes a micro-level account of how individuals curate their social and learning networks on a daily basis. When combined, these frameworks provide a thorough method for explore the role of social media in university students' learning in China and the UK.

3.3 Higher education research

3.3.1 A brief introduction of current section

In contrast to the approach taken in chapter 2, where I addressed the context of higher education (HE) in China and UK separately, with facts and statistics. This section on higher education was based on scholarly reviews and findings. In particular, I examine the research literature in the broad field of higher education research that follows a "bottom-up"/student-centred approach.

Research in higher education encompasses a wide range of topics and issues. For example, Research in Higher Education Journal (published by Springer) covers many research topics including "*administration and faculty; curriculum and instruction; student characteristics; alumni assessment; recruitment and admissions; prediction and student academic performance; campus climate; and retention, attrition, and transfer*[20]*"*(para.2). This wide range of topics indicates that HE research is more than about teaching and learning, entailing many aspects within the broad HE settings. Based on his review of 17 specialist higher education journals published in English, Tight (2012) outlines eight key themes: teaching and learning; course design; the student experience; quality; system policy; institutional management; academic work; knowledge and research. In alignment with this study which focused on university students only, I opted to examine the literature focused on the student experience as this theme is the most pertinent to my research. This is not to suggest that the student experience is homogenous, as criticised by Sabri (2011), but to provide insights from the student perspective. Under the key theme student experience, I am keen to explore literature on the overall expectations, perceptions, interactions and opinions that students have during their time at university. While the primary focus of this study is on the use of social media in various learning settings, it is crucial to recognise that the factors effecting such usage is likely to be intertwined with the broader student experience. Thus, the student experience literature can shed light on the nuanced ways in which social media contributes to their academic journey.

[20] Accessed from https://www.jstor.org/journal/resehighedu

At the same time, as suggested in chapter 2, the higher education context in China differs from its western counterparts. Accordingly, higher education as a research field in China may focus on different areas. Chen and Hu (2012) have identified shared aspects in higher education research such as teaching and learning, and policy and administration whilst aspects unique to China which includes moral education and ideo-political educational reforms. They also point out that HE research in China is shaped by a collaboration between the state and the academia. In other words, academia has less independence in its approach to research. As a research field, HE in China remains relatively neglected on the global stage. With this in mind, I endeavoured to gather relevant literature pertaining to the Chinese higher education research, especially empirical studies conducted in the Chinese HE context.

3.3.2 Student perspectives on higher education

Most of the research on students' perspective of HE focuses on specific issues such as assessments, outcomes, leadership, etc. To focus this review, I selected studies most relevant to my research (from a student perspective) and divided them into two segments: the purpose of HE and teaching and learning in HE. The first section looks at students' opinions about and expectations of higher education; the second section looks at students' opinions about teaching and learning practices within the higher education setting.

3.3.2.1 Purpose of HE

The purpose of higher education is a much-debated topic. According to Inglis (2016), to the government, a university education should prepare individuals to enhance the economy by fostering innovation, whilst for students themselves, the goal is often obtaining qualifications for improved job opportunities and higher income. Buckner and Strawser (2016) suggest that today's millennials often exhibit a sense of academic entitlement, a perception entailing the belief that instructors bear the responsibility for students' achievements, and that students' wishes should be fulfilled.

A study involving 295 students across six European countries reported that a substantial number of students perceived higher education as a means to prepare themselves for the job market, alongside personal growth and social development (Brooks et al., 2021). In a similar study in China, higher education students were found to prioritise the functional value of

higher education (Lai et al., 2012). Functional value can be understood as the practical aspects of education (i.e. the usefulness of the degree) or in other words, the ability to gain access to a good career. Lai et al. (2012) suggests that one reason why Chinese HE students value the practical aspects of the degree over personal or social benefits, is that education is seen as shielding them from poverty; the other is rooted in Chinese culture that puts a high value on pragmatism. In the UK context, a study on the impact of the new fee regime found that increased tuition fees had led to greater expectations of graduate employability (Bates & Kaye, 2014). Based on these studies, it is apparent that students' focus in HE largely revolves around career-related matters. Indeed, many students consider higher education to be pivotal in achieving career success with personal or social aspects being secondary, particularly among Chinese students.

3.3.2.2 Teaching and learning in HE

Much has been written about the impact of neoliberalism (see Mahony & Weiner, 2019) and marketisation (see Brown & Carasso, 2013) on the higher education sector. In such climate, some have argued that students are turning into customers (Molesworth et al., 2009) which then shapes the relationship between the students and the university. Research has found that students anticipate that their higher education experience will be rewarding and enjoyable (Whitton and Langan, 2018). In terms of learning, students in UK higher education exhibit an inclination towards individualism, prioritising their personal learning preferences. For example, Allan et al. (2009) conducted a study with first-year students at a UK university which revealed a preference for methods that directly amplify their individual learning experiences.

Meng and Onwuegbuzie (2015) set out to investigate students' perceptions of desired teaching in Chinese higher education. The study, involving more than 400 students at a Tier-2 university in Northern China, discovered that the key attributes of effective teaching were seen as expertise (knowledge of the curriculum) and ethics (treating all students fairly). A similar study of associate degree students in Hong Kong (Chan, 2018) revealed that apart from teachers' expertise, students also highly valued teachers who appreciate, care for and maintain friendly relationships towards students. Students assigned minimal importance to teachers as role models in this study. This is regarded as a departure from a traditional belief

and expectation that teachers should also be role models and shows that student perceptions and priorities, and what they value in educators, is changing. This shift contrasts with traditional Chinese cultural norms where the teacher has authoritative status (see sec. 2.1.2).

While the present research did not explicitly pose research questions framed as "student experience of…" or "student perspective on..." within the higher education context, the literature discussed in this section sheds light on the research context of higher education. What it alerted me to was that university students' use of social media for learning is likely to be intertwined with their perspectives of higher education in terms of the purpose of HE; secondly with what they might expect or experience in the teaching and learning practices in the HE. Hence, it might indirectly shed light on the potential factors influencing the use of social media for learning among university students (RQ3). The next section explores the literature related to social media in education.

3.4 Social media in education

3.4.1 Conceptualising social media

Given that social media platforms have a significant user base globally, individuals are probably familiar with the concept of "social media", regardless of their personal usage or engagement with these platforms. However, upon reviewing the existing literature, the concept of "social media" is often used in a flexible manner, encompassing diverse terms and variations in different research domains. To understand the notion of "social media" in the current study, I decided to unpack the idea of "social media" first.

To begin with, popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter are often referred to as Social Networking Sites (SNSs) (Hampton et al., 2011; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Livingstone, 2008) or Social Network Sites (SNSs) (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Although the difference between the two seems insignificant, as argued by Boyd and Ellison (2007), 'networking' highlights the networking feature of these social media platforms, but networking isn't the sole function of these platforms. Therefore, they advocate the term Social Network Sites, defining it as

> '*web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system*' (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211).

Boyd and Ellison (2007)'s definition identifies three distinct aspects of Social Network Sites and highlight the importance of connections within the system of these sites. Nonetheless, despite their efforts on differentiating between these two similar terms, others do not perceive a problem with using them interchangeably. For instance, Greenhow and Askari (2017) state in their study that they use the two terms as synonymous.

Many people appear to use the term SNSs as also synonymous with social media. For example, in a study examining the effects of social media on high school students' behaviours focused on a singular platform Facebook, the terms Social network and Social media are used interchangeably (Kaya & Bicen, 2016). In the social media industry, these terms are also used interchangeably. A series of reports published from Pew Research Center regarding social media usage of participants in the United States (2005-2015), social media users are referred to as social networking sites users (Perrin, 2015), with respondents being asked "do you use social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn" (Perrin, 2015, p. 11). As Greenhow and Askari (2017) point out, SNS is just one form of social media: the term "social media" encompasses a broader meaning beyond just a collection of well-known SNSs.

Under the general label of social media, Mao (2014) proposes four categories:

> *1.Social networking tools such as instant messengers, (Skype, ooVoo. . .), Facebook, Tumblr, and so on.*
>
> *2. Social publishing or sharing tools including blogs, wikis, Glogster, or Twitter; social bookmarking or tagging tools like Delicious, Symbaloo, or Diggo; photo or video sharing tools like Flickr, YouTube, ZuiTube, or Picasa; collaborative office or brain-storming tools like Google Docs & Spreadsheets, Zoho Writer, Webspiration, Gliffy, and so forth.*
>
> *3. Social and content management tools including Moodle or Edmodo; Internet-based tools used for calendars, surveys, and polls;*
>
> *4. Virtual worlds and gaming environments such as WeeWorld, Webkinz World, Club Penguin, and Playstation Network (pp.213-214)*

Given that the article was published a few years ago, it is likely that the listed example platforms may no longer be popular or relevant in the present context. This is because social media is constantly changing; new websites/platforms can appear at any time. However,

these categories and examples do not fully explain what social media is. Below I have listed five definitions identified in the literature, in chronological order:

> *'By social media technologies, we mean those digital platforms, services and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection' (Burgess et al., 2018, p. 1).*
>
> *'To define "social media" for our current purposes, we synthesize definitions presented in the literature and identify the following commonalities among current social media services:*
>
> *1) Social media services are (currently) Web 2.0 Internet-based applications,*
>
> *2) User-generated content is the lifeblood of social media,*
>
> *3) Individuals and groups create user-specific profiles for a site or app designed and maintained by a social media service,*
>
> *4) Social media services facilitate the development of social networks online by connecting a profile with those of other individuals and/or groups.' (Obar & Wildman, 2015, p. 2).*
>
> *'I use the term social media to refer to the sites and services that emerged during the early 2000s, including social network sites, video sharing sites, blogging and microblogging platforms, and related tools that allow participants to create and share their own content' (Boyd, 2014, p. 6).*
>
> *'…any website or web-based service that includes web 2.0 characteristics and contains some aspect of user generated content' (Gruzd et al., 2012, p. 2341).*
>
> *'Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).*

These examples demonstrate the broad and expansive nature of the concept of social media. We can see that social media is often closely associated with terms such as "Web 2.0" and "user-generated content". Web2.0 can be used to refer to a computer-based networked system of human communications (Fuchs, 2021). Indeed, empirical research examining social media often does so alongside Web2.0 (Tulaboev & Oxley, 2012) or is seen as interchangeable with "Web.2.0 applications" (Yoo & Kim, 2013). User generated content, on the other hand can be simply understood as the content published on online platforms (Wyrwoll, 2014).

The notion of “user generated content” highlights an important feature of social media: its users can create content and share it with other users. Indeed, many social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok rely on user generated content. Instead of trying to establish what platforms social media includes, research by Miller et al. (2016) focuses on the content people post and concludes that social media content has strong regional characteristics and therefore, should be examined region by region. This is another reason why I chose two distinct contexts in my research.

Since there is no consensus on the definition of social media. It may be helpful to look at what users think. Given the current study, I sought the views of young in the UK and China in existing research. In the UK, Dyer (2017) looked at young people’s social interactions online and found that the participants mentioned a broad range of social media platforms, not just Facebook and Twitter. Ma et al. (2021) looked at university student’s perceptions of social media as a learning source and found they used an equally broad definition. Neither of the two studies provided a definition of social media to the participants. Instead, they allowed participants to offer their account of what social media is to them. This inspired me to abandon the search for a definitive definition of social media. Instead, I designed a study that would involve participants articulating their own experiences and perspectives on social media usage and their understanding of various social media platforms. As shown in Dyer (2017), social media is a broad and multifaceted concept that extends beyond traditional Social Networking Sites (SNSs). Allowing the participants in the study to account for their own understanding and experiences of social media generated far richer data.

3.4.2 Social media use in the context of higher education

This section (3.4.2) looks at empirical social media research conducted in the higher education context, particularly involving higher education students themselves as participants. The section is divided into two sub-sections. The first focuses on the direct and indirect academic outcomes associated with social media use. This is helpful in understanding the tangible impact that using social media has on learning, as manifested in academic performances. The second discusses the research that does not centre around the effects associated with social media use. This includes studies on students’ engagement or experiences with digital technology (including social media) for learning, their attitudes or relationships with

technology. Because this thesis adopts a broad concept of social media, within this subcategory, I have chosen to broaden the focus to “digital technology” or “educational technology”, to better inform this study.

3.4.2.1 Studies focused on academic outcomes

Empirical studies in the broad field of social media and education appeared to be predominantly results-oriented, focusing on examining the impact of technology on learning and teaching outcomes. In other words, these studies investigate whether social media can enhance or hinder learning. The studies within this category typically adopt a quantitative or mixed-methods approach, with a primary focus on quantitative results. Some studies directly examine the social media use on students’ grades as in the form of Grade point average (GPA). For example, A study by Lau (2017) involving 348 undergraduates in Hong Kong, found that using social media for academic purposes did not predict cumulative GPA. Conversely, using social media for non-academic purposes, especially video gaming, had a detrimental effect on academic performance. A similar study conducted in Iraq found that the average score of students goes down by 5.35% with every one hour of Facebook use (Wakil et al., 2018). Similarly, a study with a large sample of 1839 university students in the USA found that using Facebook and texting while studying had negative effects on their GPA (Junco & Cotten, 2012).

By contrast, a recent study conducted in Guangzhou province, China, found that college students’ social media use improved their academic performance indirectly by increasing engagement. Therefore, the authors advocate that educators should pay attention to the value of social media used in the university context (Su & Huang, 2021). Similarly, in the UK, a study examined the use of Twitter among 235 first-year undergraduates and found that Twitter usage increased student engagement and therefore enhanced the learning process (Evans, 2014). However, Evans (2014) also pointed out that the participants in his study were obliged to use Twitter during their course which may have affected the outcomes, as it is does not reveal how students might use social media if it was not mandatory. Furthermore, it is possible that some students may not have used Twitter before.

The benefits of social media use in education seem to relate to the subject matter or the academic background of the students. For example, social media use is frequently reported as beneficial for people studying English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign

language (EFL). A mixed methods study in a Taiwanese EFL speaking class which incorporated social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook indicated that those university students' public speaking skills had improved (Sun & Yang, 2015). A more recent study involving two educational technology tools (learning management system-XueXiTong and social networking system-WeChat) has suggested they have positive effects on students' engagement in EFL courses in a Chinese university (Teng & Wang, 2021). The authors note that the learning management system had stronger positive effects than the social networking system. Similar positive effects of social media on English language learning can be found in other regions of the world too. For example, Instagram was found to have positive effects on Turkish university students' English language learning (Erarslan, 2019). The author therefore concludes that Instagram can be a supplement to formal teaching by exposing students to an authentic English-speaking environment. TikTok was also found to be helpful in creating a motivational learning environment for undergraduate students among sports science students (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021). This study, which employed a mixed methods approach and took place in Spain, determined that TikTok is well-suited for conveying expressive and creative content in sports science courses, particularly when music and movement are involved.

Thus, there is a growing body of research on the educational use of social media in the higher education context. Studies usually adopt a quantitative or a mixed methods approach with a quantitative focus. The findings on the effects of social media on students' academic performance remain inconsistent, as some reported social media's negative effects on students' academic performances while others found positive influences. The inconsistency may be the result of many factors, including different research contexts, different research instruments and research foci.

3.4.2.3 Studies focused on the relationship with digital technology (including social media)

This sub-section begins with Henderson et al. (2017; 2015) research on university students' experiences of digital technologies used during their university study. The study is particularly pertinent to the current study given that my research also looks at university students' use of social media (a form of digital technology) in their daily lives. Rather than seeking to establish what the potential benefits of technologies might be, Henderson et al. (2017) focused on the

actual experiences of students' everyday use with digital technologies. This survey-based study had a large sample of 1658 undergraduate students from Australian universities; the questionnaire used in this study also included two open questions "*what has been the most useful examples of technology-based learning that you've experienced so far in your university course*?" and "*Please explain why these were particularly helpful/useful*" (Henderson et al., 2017, p. 1570). These two questions yielded rich qualitative data amounting to 103,299 words. The researchers further identified 11 digital practices that were mentioned by the students as being very useful for their studies. In contrast to previous studies, they suggested that any benefits of those technologies as perceived by the students, are likely to be more *logistical* than *educational* (Henderson et al., 2017). This is interesting because many studies have simply focused on the educational benefits of technologies (such as the ones discussed in the previous section). Henderson et al., (2017, 2015) argued that the *usefulness* of digital technology does not lie in how it enhances university students' learning results but in how it helped the students to be organised and stay on track with their day-to-day activities, a function referred to as "logistics", as they explain below:

> *The logistical aspects of university study refer to the day-to-day 'work' of being a university student. In this sense, much of the engagement with digital technologies reported in this paper relates to students' pragmatic negotiation of their work, that is, the immediate demands of university study that continue to be centred on issues of assignments, grades and (non)attendance (2015, p. 317).*

They also found that digital technologies are an essential part of university study: the majority of the students in their study used several digital devices such as laptop, mobile phone to access a range of educational websites. Indeed, they propose that "It is now difficult to imagine being a university student without these technologies" (Henderson et al., 2015, p. 316). Their findings are thought-provoking in many ways. First of all, it shows that digital devices/technologies have become an indispensable part of many university students' daily life. Secondly, digital technology's usefulness lies in how it helps with university 'logistics'. In addition to this, the study's findings suggest that instead of focusing on what technology enables leaners to do, pay attention needs to be paid to the actual use of technology by learners.

In terms of social media, while a majority of the university students in Henderson et al. (2015) reported using social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, only a small percentage of people explicitly stated that they found them useful or relevant to their university studies. This finding indicates perhaps a limited awareness among these participants of the academic uses of social media. It may also be due to other reasons, such as personal preferences for social media use. Their study did not explore further why students perceived social media as not useful or irrelevant to their university studies. My research included a research question (RQ3) to address the underlying factors affecting their decision of whether or not utilise social media for learning. A better understanding of these underlying factors could help universities and educators leverage social media to the benefit of learning.

Lacka et al. (2021) study also aimed to identify the potential of digital technologies in higher education. Their study, conducted in a UK-based HE institution with both undergraduate and postgraduate students, focused on two types of digital technologies, Virtual Learning Environment (VL) and Social Media (SM) which have been widely adopted in HE setting. They found that while VL can support students in achieving HE goals with supplementary resources but requires extra inputs such as time and resources, students who utilise SM are the least effective. Lacka et al. (2021) then concluded that HE students are better off without digital technologies and that HE institutions should avoid giving excessive preference to digital tools, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era. Since their study was conducted within the UK, their findings will be compared with the current study.

Lastly, due to China's distinct social media landscape (as introduced in chapter two), empirical studies conducted in China are reviewed separately. In a review of research on higher education student engagement with digital technology, the majority of the research was found to have been conducted primarily in the global north such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Bond et al., 2020). I found one study involving hundreds of Chinese college students from 26 provinces in China. The main purpose of these students' social media use was to communicate with friends and family, entertainment as well as a way of expressing themselves online (Li, 2011). In terms of patterns of use, the study found that Chinese college students mainly used domestic social media platforms, as 235 participants used Xiaonei(Renren) while only six selected Twitter (Li, 2011). This confirms the Chinese social media landscape I described in chapter two. Another interesting finding is that many

participants only became frequent social media users after they enrolled in the university and the interview data revealed that this was due to strict parental control (Li, 2011). I mentioned in chapter two that many secondary school Chinese students are very focused on *Gaokao* preparation, which is likely to limit their use of digital devices. As in Henderson et al. (2015) students in Li's study (2011) did not uses social media for educational purposes. Li advocates using social media for education at the end of the paper but this study was conducted a decade ago when many social media platforms such as *Xiaonei* is no longer popular now. Therefore, more studies needed to be reviewed in the context of China.

Another more recent comparative study on university student perceptions of social media as a learning resource in China and the US (Ma et al., 2021) found that Chinese students had more positive attitudes towards social media as a learning source than their US counterparts. The data, collected via an online questionnaire with open and closed questions from university students in mainland China and north Texas area of the US, are particularly relevant to the current study. The authors argue that the learning experience on social media is influenced by the home culture of the participants and their previous experiences with technology (Ma et al., 2021). This study also investigated students' definitions of social media and found that students in both countries saw social media as multi-functional, including a wide range of platforms, from traditional social networking sites (e.g. Facebook/WeChat) to video-streaming sites (e.g. YouTube/Youku) to language learning platforms (e.g.Duolingo, Hujiang) and even dating apps (Ma et al.,2021). This finding confirms the broad definition of social media adopted by this thesis. One limitation of this study is that sample sizes between the two countries are relatively small and uneven: a total of 241 responses (157 from China and 84 from US), which may affect the reliability and generalisability of the findings.

Thus, in terms of students' actual use or experiences with technology, results from different empirical studies vary. Some studies, including those by Henderson et al. (2017, 2015) and Lacka et al. (2021), appear to cast doubt on the efficacy of digital technologies in higher education (HE). These studies caution against succumbing to the enthusiasm surrounding the integration of social media and other digital technologies, suggesting a need for a more critical perspective. However, university students in mainland China, as evidenced by the studies examined in this section, appear to hold a more favourable view of incorporating social media into their learning experiences.

3.5 Research questions

Although existing studies have applied frameworks such as Connectivism, the network society, and networked individualism to examine young people's engagement with digital technologies, much of this work has been conducted in Western contexts, particularly with students in the UK and Australia (e.g., Selwyn, 2009; Henderson et al., 2017). These studies demonstrate the value of linking learning practices with broader theories of digital connectivity, yet they do not fully address the distinctive cultural, political, and platform environments in China, where social media is shaped by state regulation, platform governance, and localised usage patterns (as discussed in the context chapter) Moreover, previous research often examines social media either as a site of learning (formal, informal, or non-formal) or as a space for social networking, but rarely integrates these perspectives to explore how students' everyday practices simultaneously reflect learning processes, personal network management, and the structural dynamics of the network society. This gap limits our understanding of both the cross-cultural similarities and the contextual differences in how students navigate their social and learning networks.

To address these gaps, this study investigates Chinese and UK university students' social media practices through the combined lenses of Connectivism, Castells' network society, and Wellman's networked individualism. Three research questions are proposed below:

- RQ1: How do university students in China and the UK use social media in the network society?
- RQ2: What is the role of social media in university students' formal, informal and non-formal learning?
- RQ3: What are the factors that impact students' use of social media for learning across formal, informal, and non-formal learning?

The aim of RQ1 is to map and compare the everyday social media practices of university students across the two cultural contexts. This includes identifying what platforms students use, how frequently, and for what purposes (e.g., academic resources, communication, entertainment). By situating these practices within Castells' concept of the network society, the research seeks to show how students' constant connectivity and multi-purpose use of

platforms reflect broader structural dynamics of digital networks. This question therefore provides a descriptive and comparative foundation for the study.

The aim of RQ2 to examine how social media functions as a learning tool, not only in formal educational settings but also in informal and non-formal learning contexts. Building on Connectivism, this question investigates how students use social media to create, access, and navigate learning networks and how this role may differ between Chinese and UK contexts.

The aim of RQ3 is to identify and analyse the potential reasons and contextual influences that shape students' use of social media for learning. Factors may include cultural norms, institutional preferences, peer influences, or national regulatory policies. This question goes beyond description to explain variation in students' practices, providing insight into why social media is taken up in particular ways for learning in different contexts. It also highlights the constraints and opportunities that shape digital learning practices in the network society.

3.6 Summary of this chapter

In this literature review chapter, I have explored pertinent scholarly works across three primary domains: learning theories, higher education research (from the student perspective), and social media research. This division stems from the interdisciplinary approach taken in this research, which aims to investigate the intersections of learning, higher education and social media within a single study.

Conducting this literature review helped me in the decision to adopt connectivism and the notions of formal, informal and non-formal learning, as the theoretical framework of this study. It also helped in deciding on a broad definition of 'social media' (not limited to certain social media platforms) and largely depending on the participants' understandings of social media. The empirical research reviewed in this chapter (mainly in section 3.3.2 and 3.4.2) serve as a foundation for later analysis and discussion of the data.

I also identified gaps in the existing research: firstly, few studies focus on students' authentic encounters with social media usage within the higher education setting; furthermore, the majority of these studies are based in the global north. Secondly, much research on social media in education has focused on its potential (quantitative) benefits academically or pedagogically, as discussed in 3.4.2.1. I also found that existing investigations pertaining to

social media for educational purposes often concentrate on specific platforms. By contrast, this study does not impose any platform restrictions, instead allowing participants to report on the platforms they personally employ. Furthermore, regardless of the angle of the research undertaken to investigate the impact of social media utilisation or students' practical exposure to digital technology, including social media, the outcomes exhibit a divergent pattern, with certain studies reporting positive effects while others suggest limited utility in facilitating students' higher education (HE) pursuits. This study seeks to address this fill in the gap by conducting a comprehensive examination of university students' social media use in two countries. By not give a pre-defined definition or platform limitations, I allow the participants to report on their social media usage based on their understandings of social media. With the data collected through a combinations of research instruments and two research sites, my research intends to offer insights that can contribute to a more cohesive and insightful understanding of the actual use of social media by HE students in UK and China and the role of social media in these HE students' learning. It aims to bridge the gap in existing literature and provide insights for educators and policymakers.

Chapter 4 Methodology

This chapter addresses the philosophical positionings and methodological approach of this research. It provides a detailed description of the research design and the methods used for data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations and reflexibility in terms of the researcher's knowledge, beliefs and identity during the research process, are discussed towards the end of this chapter.

4.1 Research approach

4.1.1Epistemological and ontological positions

This section describes the epistemological and ontological stance adopted in this study.

The present study adopts a mixed methods research design (MMR) which combines quantitative and qualitative research in one project (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative and qualitative approaches have often be seen as opposed to each other, referred to as the "quantitative/qualitative divide" (Bryman, 2016, p.621) by some. This divide can be seen as rooted in differences between the underlying philosophical orientations of each approach. Quantitative research is said to be derived from the natural sciences and can be often seen as associated with the philosophical assumptions of positivism or post-positivism (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). From a positivist worldview, the only true knowledge is scientific knowledge which can only be obtained through scientific methods (Ayiro, a). By contrast, qualitative research is usually considered as naturalistic and is often linked with constructivism or interpretivism (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In constructivist and interpretivist [21] worldviews, reality is seen as existing in an individual's subjective interpretation (Ayiro, 2012).

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches has led to numerous debates around the strengths and weaknesses of these two approaches, in particular, the so-called paradigm wars in the 1980s (Cohen et al., 2017). These disputes may have contributed to the increased interest in mixed methods research in recent years. A decade ago, Bryman (2008) pointed out that the rise of mixed methods research (MMR) signals the end of the

[21]The term Constructivism or Social constructivism is often being seen used interchangeably with Interpretivism (e.g. Ayivo,2012) or considered as related to Interpretivism (e.g. Creswell &Creswell, 2018)

paradigm wars. MMR was addressed as the third approach or third methodological movement following the quantitative and qualitative approaches (see e.g. Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011).

My chosen methodological approach (MMR) has influenced the epistemological and ontological positions of this research in that this study adopts pragmatism as the research paradigm. Under a pragmatist paradigm, multiple research methods and different modes of analysis are used in order to answer the research questions. Pragmatism is not tied to any particular philosophical assumptions. Instead, it focuses on what works for the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Unlike other research paradigms (mentioned in the last paragraph), pragmatism does not have fixed or rigid beliefs about how knowledge is acquired or the nature of reality. Therefore, I approached this research with a flexible ontological stance, open to different ways of understanding the world. In the pragmatic view, how reality should be researched or measured depends on what works best for the research questions (Creswell, 2018). As a result, I also did not have a single or fixed epistemological stance on how knowledge should be obtained and justified. I was open to adapting my research methods as needed. By adopting pragmatism, I have avoided delving into the philosophical debates of whether or not there is a singular, fixed reality or whether reality exists on its own or constructed within or interpreted by individuals. Instead, I have prioritised my research questions and employed research methods, according to whether they can answer those research questions.

In this study, I adopt a pragmatic approach, which allows for the flexible integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods. From an epistemological standpoint, pragmatism emphasises that knowledge is not confined to a single way of knowing, but is derived from both objective, measurable data (such as statistical trends in surveys) and subjective, experiential knowledge (gained from interviews and focus groups). This flexibility supports the use of different research methods to explore a research phenomenon from different angles, offering a more comprehensive understanding. In terms of ontology, pragmatism aligns with a pluralistic view of reality, suggesting that the world is complex and multifaceted. This view supports both quantitative methods (which focus on patterns and generalisable data) and qualitative methods (which explore deeper meanings and experiences), allowing

this study to acknowledge the multi-dimensionality of reality where both objective data and subjective interpretations are essential for fully understanding the research problem.

There are a number of reasons why my research is in line with a pragmatist worldview. In the context of the current research, social media can be understood as an evolving, independent technology (existing on its own) while at the same time, social media use is also a subjective, individual experience (perceived and experienced by individuals). To be more specific, these social media apps/platforms do exist independently—and how participants use them can be measured with numerical data such as frequencies. Meanwhile, I also think that the reality is constructed and experienced by the participants: participants' perceptions of these social media platforms and their experiences using social media for learning, may vary significantly. More importantly, pragmatism is said to be well suited to MMR in social science (Morgan, 2014). Pragmatism's flexibility in terms of its philosophical assumptions allowed me to prioritise practicality and problem-solving over rigid adherence to a particular methodological or philosophical stance. As a result, it allowed me (and other MMR researchers) to adopt mixed methods to help answer the research questions effectively. In the next section, I will explain the MMR design of the current study.

4.1.2 Methodological approach-- mixed methods research

MMR in this thesis is understood as combining or integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches in one study. However, beyond this simple overview, a wide array of definitions can be found in the literature. Some emphasise the “methods” aspects when defining MMR. Morgan (2014), by contrast, emphasises the “data” aspects, arguing that MMR is a project that combines qualitative and quantitative data to answer the research question. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) have advocated a definition encompassing multiple aspects, considering MMR as a method, research design and philosophical orientation all in one. In this project, MMR is regarded mainly as a methodological approach; however, it signals a philosophical orientation (pragmatism) as explained in previous section.

There are several reasons why this study combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative methods complement the qualitative methods in addressing the research questions, enabling a fuller and more balanced understanding of the phenomenon. In Doyle, Brady and Byrne (2016) paper, they summarised common rationales for adopting mixed-

methods research (MMR), including triangulation, expansion, exploration, completeness, offsetting weaknesses, answering different research questions, and illustration. For this study, the primary rationale can be summarised as completeness. For example, in the questionnaire, the closed-ended questions collected quantitative data on which social media platforms participants used and how frequently they use them. These numerical data help to reveal the general trends on their social media use. However, the qualitative focus groups provided more detailed accounts of why particular platforms were used, what meanings these students attached to them, and how they related to learning. In this way, mixing methods provided multiple angles and greater depth, producing a more comprehensive picture of university students' use of social media.

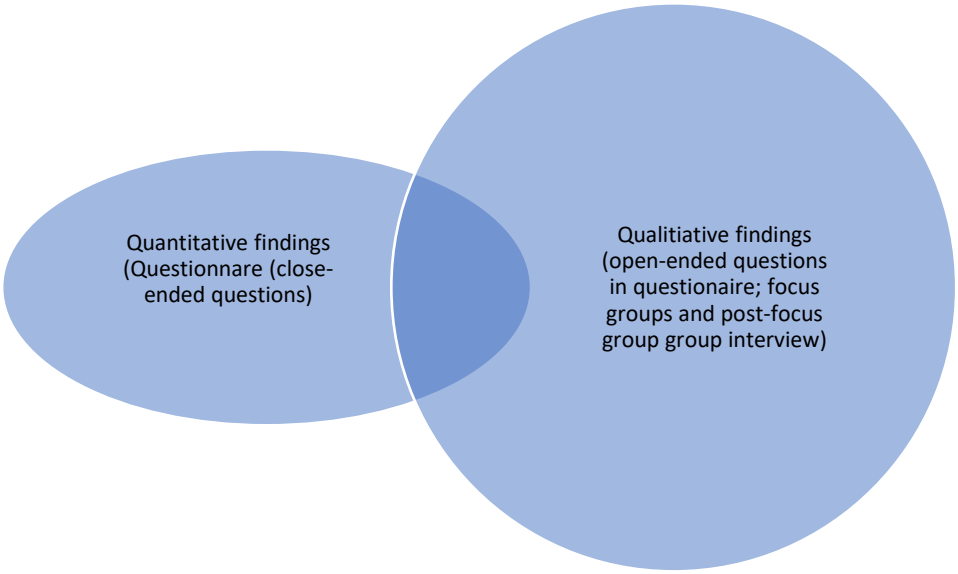
In addition, the use of MMR aligns with the philosophical foundations of this research, which are grounded in pragmatism (see Section 4.1.1). Since pragmatism is not bound to a single epistemological or ontological position, which makes it particularly compatible for combining quantitative and qualitative methods—even when these are seen as stemming from different philosophical assumptions (Cohen et al., 2017). Morgan (2014) notes that adopting pragmatism is common in MMR because pragmatism focuses on what is working for answering the research questions rather than adhering rigidly to a single paradigm. Within pragmatism framework, the interpretive orientation of the qualitative strand in this study is also legitimised. Pragmatism allows the study to draw on interpretivism to explore the meanings and interpretations that university students in China and the UK attach to their social media practices, while simultaneously using quantitative analysis to establish broader patterns. Thus, pragmatism not only justifies the integration of research methods but also provides coherence between descriptive, numerical data and interpretive, textual data.

Beyond completeness and philosophical alignment, there were also practical reasons for adopting MMR. For example, the questionnaire also served as a recruitment tool for the focus groups by including a final question inviting participants to show their interest for participation. Taken together, these theoretical and practical considerations demonstrate that MMR was the most appropriate approach for addressing the aims of this study.

4.1.2.1 MMR design

A convergent MMR design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) was employed for the current study. This means that the quantitative strand and qualitative strand of this research were planned to take place almost the same time. The analysis of the two types of data occurred separately, with results then compared. This comparison stage is also when data triangulation in MMR occurs (in the darker blue where the intersection happened) . Figure 4.1 below shows how mixed methods research was implemented in this research. As illustrated in figure 4.1, this research is a qualitative-dominant MMR as the qualitative findings constitute a larger portion than the quantitative findings. The overlapping area in figure 4.1 (in darker blue) symbolises where the quantitative and qualitative findings have contributed to addressing the same research phenomenon or answering the same research question. Indeed, the research instruments used in this study were designed to address all three research questions. Moreover, in convergent designs, quantitative and qualitative data are meant to be converged and compared (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Figure 4.1 Venn diagram presentation of MMR design



4.2 Research instruments

Before explaining the individual research instrument used in this study, I would like to briefly explain the target population of this study for all the research methods used in this study. The target population were undergraduate students in one university in China and UK. Considering the average age of the undergraduate students in China and UK (as mentioned in the context chapter), the age range was loosely set to 18-24 years old, though exceptions were considered beyond this. This is due to the reality of these two institutions that majority (especially for the Chinese university) consisted of mainly undergraduate students. In addition to this, all the participants of this research were expected to be current students at their university, regardless of what they were studying. In addition, though the participants' knowledge of social media was not considered by the researcher, it is expected that the students who participated the study would have some knowledge or interest of social media.

4.2.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to collect 100 responses in each research site considering the factors such as average numbers of undergraduate students in each country and response rate. As it is an anonymised survey and had no records of numbers access of the electronic survey due to the technology used, therefore numbers of responses were considered. In reality, Chinese survey had 102 responses, and the English survey received 99 responses (see sec.5.2.1 and 6.2.1 for more detailed questionnaire overview).

The questionnaire in this study was designed to provide preliminary insights to all three research questions with the additional purpose of recruiting focus group participants. Questionnaires can be done quickly and easily without the presence of the researcher (Cohen et al., 2017) In this study, the questionnaire was completed online by participants through Microsoft Forms. For the participants in China, the link was sent to a small number of participants personally known by me (convenience sampling), then further spread to these participants' friends and classmates (snowball sampling). The known contact who helped to distribute my questionnaire were anonymised as "Xu" in the Chinese focus group one, however remained unknown in the survey as it is anonymised. For the participants in the UK, similar non-probability sampling methods were used.

To be more specific, in order to answer RQ1 “How do Chinese/UK university students use social media in their lives”, the questionnaire contained a series of questions in terms of the participants’ internet and social media use. The questionnaire mainly consisted of close-ended questions which were used to generate numerical data. It should be noted that some of these questions were not directly about social media (e.g., frequencies of internet use; digital devices owned etc.). However, these questions can help to understand the participants’ general habits and the digital environment they inhabit, which in turn better explains how these university students use social media in their lives. Next, a set of 10 Likert scale questions were posed in relation to 10 statements about social media and learning which aimed to elicit the respondents’ attitudes towards social media for learning. Again, although attitudes towards social media for learning was not the primary concern of this study, it also helped to better understand RQ2, the role of social media in their learning. Lastly, the three open-ended questions were used to answer RQ2 and 3. By including both close-end questions and open-end questions, statistical findings such as frequencies and trends could be generated but also responses that enabled me to further explore individual participant’s thoughts and opinions in their own words. The last question asked respondents whether they were interested in taking part in future focus groups.

There are a number of benefits to including open-ended questions in questionnaires, such as providing a chance for the respondents to answer in their own words and allowing unusual responses (Bryman, 2016). Though this research set out to examine social media use for learning, it is possible that there are people who do not use social media for such purposes or do not use social media at all. Adding open-ended questions can help collect such responses (if any). Moreover, as a pragmatist doing a mixed-methods research, I found that including open-ended questions in the questionnaire particularly suited my research approach as it help to addresses my research questions in a direct manner: by eliciting examples of using social media for learning, I can examine closely how these students use social media for learning with real-life examples; meanwhile, the question about benefits and disadvantages can also help to understand the potential factors underlying their use of social media for learning purposes. Nevertheless, as Bryman (2016, p.244) pointed out, respondents can be “put off by having to writing extensively” to answer open-ended questions. Having considered that, only three optional open-ended questions were included (with the last one

for recruiting participants for focus groups). The use of focus groups (described below) also helped further expand on the participants' voices.

The questionnaire used in this study also possessed some limitations. First of all, it was not adapted from a previous study. A "new" questionnaire, comparing to established questionnaires from previous studies may lack reliability and validity. To address this issue, a pilot study was conducted before the full-scale study. Meanwhile, the questionnaire was also reviewed by my PhD supervisors. Nevertheless, as a "new" questionnaire, it may still possess other limitations such as comparability issues (not comparable to data from other studies that used established questionnaires) and possible bias and errors. Furthermore, due to the sampling methods used, the questionnaire data cannot be used to do advanced statistical analysis and not generalisable in every context. As for the aim of the questionnaire was to provide a snapshot of the participants' general use and attitudes towards social media and learning. Though only descriptive statistics were used in later analytical process, it was sufficed for the purpose of this study.

4.2.2 Focus group

Focus groups were used in this research to collect qualitative data. They were designed to cover all three research questions. Focus groups can yield a large amount of data in a short period of time (Cohen et al, 2017). The sampling methods used for the focus groups in both locations was a combination of convenience sampling, snowball sampling and random sampling. Since each focus group's formation and recruiting process was different, further details will be provided in the findings chapter 5 and 6.

Five focus groups were conducted in each research sites, with 6-10 participants in each group (the exact number is provided in two findings chapter 5 and 6), which is a generally accepted size for conducting focus groups (Nyumba et al., 2018). In terms of the numbers of focus groups, Bryman (2016) pointed out that the numbers of groups needed should be determined by when data saturation was reached (Bryman, 2016). In practice, data saturation was reached as similar answers began to emerge in the last two groups during the data collection in each site.

The actual process of the focus group, however, is less conventional. Generally, focus groups for research purposes are conducted with a moderator or facilitator (Cohen et al, 2017) to oversee the process. However, in this study, I chose to ask for a volunteer among the participants to be group-leader. My job as a researcher, therefore, was to observe, audio-record the session and write down any interesting points or questions that emerged. My interference in the discussion was kept minimal: I would only interfere if the participants had any questions or if the conversation went too "off-topic". This was to make the process as natural as possible and encourage the participants to interact with each other. Meanwhile, this practice of leaving one of the focus group participants to lead the discussion also resulted some limitations such as less of control of the duration and content. Therefore, in chapter 5 and 6 there will be a small section documented each group's situation (5.3.1 and 6.3.1).

According to Cohen et al. (2017), the key differences between a focus group and a group interview is that the former focuses on the interaction within the group itself rather than the researcher versus the group. This indicates that the researcher probably needs to take on a secondary role and maximise the interactions between the participants themselves. Meanwhile, there are drawbacks of the focus group as a research instrument and my approach of conducting it. This approach led to me having less "control" of the data collection process. On the other hand, conversations between participants seemed more natural and sometimes generated unexpected aspects.

4.2.3 Semi-structured (group) interviews

Originally, semi-structured interviews were planned after the focus groups with one of the participants from each setting. However, based on the results from the pilot study (see section 4.3), semi-structured interviews were replaced by a quick group interview, conducted right after each focus group discussion. Cohen et al. (2017) note that there are a number of distinct purposes to using interviews: first, it is useful when it comes to collecting the interviewees' knowledge, values preferences and attitudes; moreover, it can be used in combination with other data collection methods, for example, to act as a follow-up after the survey. Given that my involvement during the focus groups was kept to a minimum, the follow-up group interview was a perfect tool with which to continue investigating any remaining issues. In other words, these group interviews still served the same purpose of

semi-structed interviews: to provide an opportunity to target any interesting ideas from the discussion and questions that I might have for the participants. This group interview still followed a semi-structured approach which meant that I had fixed questions to ask each group of participants but also had emerging questions based on each group's discussion.

4.3 Pilot study

In order to refine the research instruments and test the feasibility of the research, a pilot study was conducted prior to the main study. It is generally acknowledged that conducting a pilot study is advisable especially before administering a questionnaire or structured interview (Bryman, 2016; Clark et al., 2021; Cohen et al., 2017). Considering that this was my first-time employing a focus group as a data collection technique, I felt a pilot study would be useful. Thus, the pilot study consisted of a small-scale survey, one focus group session and one semi-structured interview.

The sample size of the pilot study is suggested to be around 10-40% of the main study (Hertzog, 2008). Given that the main study aimed to collect around 100 questionnaire responses, conduct five focus groups and one semi-structured interview session with one participant who had participated in the focus group, the pilot study aimed to receive 10 questionnaire responses, conduct one focus group and one semi-structured interview with participants in China and UK separately. Similar to the main study, all participants in the pilot study were recruited by convenience sampling. By doing this, I was also able to get timely feedback from my participants. The pilot study participants were all current undergraduate students in the same institutions from which participants were recruited for the main study. The participants in the UK were aged from 20-21 and the participants in China were aged 19-23. The questionnaire was sent to the participants to fill in online on Microsoft Forms. For participants in the UK, the focus group and semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio recorded. For participants in China, these were done remotely with the help of the group chat function on WeChat. The pilot study with participants in two countries was done around the same time, at the end of 2018.

The pilot study helped to improve many aspects of this research. For the questionnaire, a number of problems about the wording and phrasing of the questionnaire items were improved. For instance, one of the 5-point ratings question was drafted as "1" stood for the

most something and “5” stood for the least something, which was odd according to one participant. This was later changed to 1-5 as the least to the most which was more appropriate. Furthermore, the questionnaire was first composed in English only; however, after sending it to one participant in China, he suggested that it would be better if it was in Chinese as it would be easier to understand. This advice was adopted, and the Chinese stage of the study was done in Mandarin Chinese.

In addition, the pilot study also prepared me for the focus groups and semi-structured interviews. One characteristic of the focus groups in this research was the recruiting of participants from friends rather than strangers. This is opposite to what Cohen et al. (2017) advocate, suggesting that focus groups should be composed of almost strangers, unless friendship is one of the aspects that the researcher intends to study. However, the pilot study revealed that it was easier for the focus group participants to communicate with each other if they already knew each other; therefore, when recruiting participants in the main study I encouraged the students who were interested in taking part to bring along their friends.

Last but not least, the semi-structured interview was replaced by group interview which was conducted right after the focus group. Practical reasons are behind this change. To be more specific, in the pilot study, as the semi-structured interview were conducted after the focus group separately with questions relating their responses during the focus group, the interviewees found it difficult for them to recall what had been discussed in the focus group in a separate interview. This problem may have also been resolved by changing the timing of the semi-structured interviews, placing them right after the focus group was finished. However, as there was only one semi-structured interview with one focus group participant planned, it was hard to explore interesting aspects of the data as it might not have been this particular interviewee’s opinions. Therefore, to address time issues and to ensure that I heard from as many as participants as possible, the semi-structured interviews with one focus group participant were replaced by a semi-structured group interview after the focus group discussion. Furthermore, it is necessary to conduct a group interview after the focus group for this study. As the focus group in this study were conducted in a not so “conventional” way which gave the participants highly freedom of their discussion with no interference during their talk. A short group interview with the participants serves the purpose of debriefing and

clarifications, allowing me to ask the participants follow up questions. This also explains the why the duration was relatively short.

In practice, including group interviews right after the focus group discussion enabled me to address some of the interesting aspects that appeared during the focus groups by directly asking the participants, without interfering with their conversations during the focus group itself.

4.4 Data collection

4.4.1 Research sites and participant sampling

The target population of this study is the university students in the two "context" (as discussed in chapter two). Therefore, the population of this study was university students (undergraduates) in two higher education institutions, one situated in the People's Republic of China (University A) and one in the United Kingdom (University B). The two universities are briefly described below:

> *University A is a "second tier" university (see context chapter for the explanation of tier system of the universities) in the southern part of China. According to its official website, this is a multi-disciplinary university. It has 17 schools and one independent college which attracts over 20000 students from all over China. There is no official data on the numbers of international students, but their 2022 international students' admission plan shows it only planned to recruit 20 students in one online education programme.*
>
> *University B is a public research university in the east of England. Based on the information of its official website and HESA, it is in the top 30 universities in the UK, with over 18,000 students in the 2019/2020 school year. Among them, over 4000 were postgraduate students. Moreover, University B attracts over 3500 international students from all over the world.*

As we can see, these two universities are hugely different in terms of scale, student composition and reputation. They were selected due to their accessibility to me as a researcher and the possibility of conducting research, rather than for their similarities.

4.4.2 Data collection process

For the participants in China, the questionnaire link was sent to 2 participants via convenience sampling. Then, with the help of these participants, the questionnaire link was shared with their classmates and friends who were also studying in University A (snowball sampling).

However, it was not clear how many potential participants the questionnaire was reached to as it only recorded submitted responses instead of the numbers of accesses. This data collection process started around January 2019. Then, I went to China and conducted fieldwork from February to April of 2019. The fieldwork mainly involved recruiting participants, negotiating times and location for focus groups, and hosting the focus groups.

The focus group participants were also recruited through a combination of sampling methods. Some of the participants were recruited through convenience sampling whilst some were recruited through the questionnaire used in this study. Additionally, some of the participants brought their friends and classmates to participate. As each focus group's formation and recruiting process was different, further details were provided in the findings chapter 5 (sec.5.3.1) and 6 (sec.6.3.1). The focus groups were designed to last around 20-40 minutes long however the actual duration of the focus groups ranged from 26 minutes to 53 minutes across two research sites. The differences in duration depended on the situation of each group. For example, some groups had slightly more participants than others, and participants appeared more engaged in the discussion, resulting in longer sessions.

All the focus group discussions were audio recorded with the participants' permission. Focus groups were held in empty classrooms (China) and bookable rooms (UK) on campus. Each focus group was given a topic guide and had a volunteer participant as a "host" to facilitate the discussion. My interference as a researcher was kept at a minimum, unless the participants were confused over some of the questions. After each focus group, as per adjustment made according to the pilot study. I would do a brief semi-structured group interview discussing any interesting aspects that appeared in the focus group discussion, along with some pre-designed questions such as "what do you think social media is" to the participants. This helped to answer a lot of questions while overseeing their focus group discussions. The main purpose of these group interviews was to allow room for debriefing and clarification of any confusions or questions that arose during the focus group discussion. As a result, the duration was set to be relatively short, ranging from 10 to 20 minutes. Participants were informed that a short group interview would take place immediately following the focus group discussion, and that a minimum of 40 minutes in total would be required. In practice, the actual group interviews after each focus group ranged from 5 to 10

minutes, depending on each group's situation—such as the number of questions remaining and the level of participant engagement.

Similar recruiting and sampling approaches were used for the participants in the UK. The English questionnaire was distributed from April 2019. However, it was harder for me to recruit enough participants for the questionnaire and focus groups as I anticipated, perhaps because of being too close to exam season. Therefore, additional help was utilised through gatekeepers (head of school or equivalent). Specifically, the questionnaire link was shared through a school's email newsletter, after being granted permission from the gatekeepers. With their help, I was able to reach similar numbers of respondents to the Chinese site (for the numbers of participants or responses in UK study, see chapter 6). Moreover, as the time of conducting focus group was during the exam and assessment period (May-June), only a few participants were willing to participate in the focus groups. Therefore, the UK focus groups were rescheduled to the autumn term in which the five focus group discussions were held between September and November 2019. This time, the recruitment of the focus group participants also involved a financial incentive due to lower recruitment: each participant was given £5 for their participation. As a financial gift was not selected in the ethics application prior to data collection, I consulted the ethics committee over this matter and gained their permission. As a result, £5 money incentive were offered to UK focus group participants whilst no reward Chinese focus group participants. However, as the Chinese study were conducted beforehand, the participants in China were not aware of the money incentive provided for their UK counterparts. Apart from pragmatic reasons behind this choice, this might result from cultural or societal norms such as giving cash or gift vouchers is a fairly common practice to research participants (b) in the UK. Anecdotally, as a PhD researcher studying overseas, I felt I was more respected in the Chinese research site due to my identity, this might also make it easier for me to recruit participants in China than in the UK.

In addition, the focus group discussions were led by one of the focus group participants. Besides written materials (focus group protocol) with example questions listed, no prior training was giving to these focus group leaders/facilitators. Hence, the quality of the qualitative data collected is likely to be affected. Judging from the actual data collected, across the two data collection sites, group leaders/facilitators followed pre-prepared written material with sample questions. The main differences lie in the time distribution in each topic

area (as shown in focus group guide in appendix) spent. This was often result from whether the group/group leaders asked extra questions or digging deeper as per other group members' responses. For example, for the participants in China, they have discussed online courses extensively in the focus groups however this was not "prepared" in the written material. Overall, this outcome was expected as the focus groups were designed to be "semi-structured" as following the written guide whilst allowing room for unexpected ideas and topics. However, future studies would benefit more if the facilitator was trained prior to the data collection or have a non-participant to be the facilitator to have more control over the length of each area of topics for discussion.

It worth pointing out that the research tools in the UK were improved compared to the Chinese counterpart. Not only was the focus group topic guide made more detailed with more example questions given, but also, participants' written feedback was also collected (voluntary based), with the hope of improving the next sessions.

4.5 Data analysis

4.5.1 Quantitative data analysis

The quantitative data was analysed using a combination of software including Microsoft Forms, Excel and SPSS. As the questionnaire was distributed online via Microsoft Forms, the results were initially stored in Forms. Then, the results were transferred into Microsoft Excel to be prepared for further analysis in SPSS. Since the questionnaire was designed to provide an overall impression of the population in terms of their internet/social media use and learning, descriptive statistics are best suited for such purposes. This is because descriptive statistics can reveal general trends in the dataset, instead of testing a hypothesis or making predictions (Cohen et al., 2017). For most of the close-ended questions in the questionnaire, the results were analysed in terms of frequency and accompanied by tables or graphs, with total counts and percentages.

4.5.2 Qualitative data analysis

The qualitative data of this research (including open-ended questionnaire answers) was analysed using thematic analysis (TA). TA is said to be one of the most widely used approaches

to qualitative data analysis in social science (Bryman, 2016). Despite its popularity, TA has been considered as 'poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.77) in the past, probably due to insufficient literature on TA. However, Braun and Clarke (2006) have developed TA in a systematic way and provided clear guidelines on how to do it. This 2006 paper is considered as a landmark and is frequently cited (Howitt, 2019; Howitt & Cramer, 2016; Terry et al., 2017).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), TA is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). In their latest work on TA, they describe TA as "a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic process of data coding to develop themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 4). In other words, finding and eliciting the themes within the data is the key in TA. More recently, Braun and Clarke (2021) have begun to refer to their approach as Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) which is rooted in the values of a qualitative paradigm. The term *reflexive* is used to highlight the importance of the critical reflection of the researcher. Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 5) "came to recognise that valuing a subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher, a reflexive researcher, is a fundamental characteristic of TA for us". Although I agree that recognising subjectivity and being self-critical is important during the data analysis process, I would not call my approach to TA as RTA, simply because my research is not a purely qualitative research but a MMR. However, RTA has inspired me to recognise my subjectivity and research bias (which I will elaborate on fully in the limitations section).

TA remains a popular data analytic approach for many reasons. First of all, it is relatively accessible and flexible. Unlike other qualitative data analysis methods such as discourse analysis and conversation analysis which are heavily theoretical based, TA does not rely on a specific theory (Howitt & Cramer, 2016). In other words, TA is not bound to certain epistemological or other theoretical assumptions, which makes TA potentially suitable for a wide variety of research purposes. Given its theoretical freedom, TA could be adapted to different studies. In practice, many mixed methods research use TA to analyse their qualitative data (Snelson, 2016). As MMR researchers are prone to be involved in the deep philosophical debates of mixing qualitative and quantitative research paradigms, a theoretically-unspecific analytic method like TA can be preferable. My MMR follows a pragmatic epistemology. Therefore, TA works for my research. Moreover, my goal is not to

generate some form of a theory at the end of the analysis process. Lastly, TA is suitable for my research inquiries, given that the qualitative portion of my research builds on the university students' use of social media for learning and seeks to identify their experiences, attitudes and views on such usage. Braun and Clarke (2012) pointed out that TA is best suited for research that seeks to explore experiences, thoughts and behaviours across data sets. This echoes with my research goals. In terms of the data collection methods, it is said that TA is good for examining responses from open-ended survey questions, focus group discussions and interviews (Swart, 2019). This again aligns with the research techniques I used in this study. Hence, I chose to use TA to examine my qualitative data.

On the other hand, TA is also controversial especially when it comes to the details of the analytic process. Bazeley (2013) argues that people who claim that they have used TA tend to be unclear about how they identified the themes from the data. Just as Howitt and Cramer (2016, p396) put it "many researchers gloss over what they actually did when reporting a thematic analysis based study". This makes some scholars question TA's trustworthiness (e.g. Nowell et al., 2017), with some suggesting that a detailed explanation and justification is needed, rather than simply presenting the themes alongside some relevant quotations (Bryman, 2016; Howitt, 2019; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). To address these criticisms, I have also provided my analytical process in table 4.1 alongside description of the themes formation in the findings chapter 5 and 6.

Table 4.1: Phases of Thematic Analysis and Phase Description of process adapt from (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Phases as identified in Braun and Clarke (2006)	Description of what I did in each phase
1.Familiarising yourself with the data	Listened to the recordings several times, transcribing data and checking there were no mistakes or missing data; read and reread the transcripts .
2. Generating initial codes	Started with line by line coding
3.Searching for patterns and themes	Examined the codes I generated and paid attention to the repeated ones; tidy up the codes; write down the codes on separate paper and map out themes
4.Reviewing themes	Review the themes with the transcripts and research questions
5. Defining and naming themes	Review the wording of the themes
6. Producing the report	Write the analysis; select extracts from transcripts

4.5.3 A note on the analysis of qualitative open text data

All the open-ended question responses received from the questionnaire were printed out and analysed manually following a "broad" thematic analysis approach. That is to say, instead of searching for themes, I categorised my data (see appendix E). Given that most of the responses were short answers, it seemed more appropriate to leave the analysis level to categorisation instead of theming. Essentially, the qualitative data coded with similar meanings were grouped into one category, making the analytic products too descriptive to be called themes. The detailed analytical process of the qualitative data generated by the questionnaire includes: firstly, reading all responses multiple times to gain familiarisation and form an overall impression of the data; then, the data went through an initial cycle of coding; the codes were generated either through a coding method called In Vivo coding, which means I directly used the language of the respondents or descriptive coding, which means the codes are a description of what has been addressed (Saldaña, 2021); after this initial coding, I formed categories from the codes I had from the previous cycle of coding. These categories were directly related to the open-ended questions.

4.6 Ethical considerations

It is important for researchers to follow ethical principles and to protect the research participants' rights and wellbeing. As Cohen et al. (2017, p112) emphasise, "educational researchers must take account the effects of the research on the participants; they have a responsibility to act such a way to preserve their dignity as human beings". In order to maintain ethical standards in this study, I took a series of precautions and measures into account before conducting the research: prior to commencing this research, I carefully considered ethical guidelines as evidenced by my submission of two ethics applications (one for the pilot study, one for the main study) to the School of Education and Lifelong Learning's ethics committee at the University of East Anglia. Both applications were approved by the ethics committee. During the data collection process, I gave out the participant information sheet to the participants and made sure that they were aware of the purpose and scope of the study (by confirming in the questionnaire and through oral confirmation and signature on the confirmation sheet during the focus group). Moreover, I also communicated with the ethics committee and followed their advice when there was an unplanned scenario during data collection (the financial incentive for the UK focus group participants). Specific ethical considerations of this research are explained in the following sub-sections.

4.6.1 Informed consent

All the participants were invited to read the participant information statement and sign the consent form (see appendix A). The participant information statement included detailed information on what the research was about, who was running the study, what the study would involve for participants, the risks and benefits of the study and data protection. When it was not feasible to obtain a physical signature, alternative measures were taken. For example, as the questionnaire was distributed online, a shortened version of the participant information statement was positioned at the beginning of the questionnaire with a full version accessible via a separate link. There was also a mandatory question placed before the actual questionnaire: by clicking yes, the participants indicated that they had read the statement and given consent to participate in this research. If "no" was selected, the questionnaire would be terminated. Other additional measures were taken to ensure the participants were well-informed before giving their consent, including my explanation and

answering participants' questions in the focus groups and group interviews. The focus group participants also gave additional oral consent for taking part in this research before the discussion.

4.6.2 Right to withdraw

The participants were partially given the right to withdraw from the study, most notably during the focus groups. For the questionnaire, individual participants could not withdraw once the participant had submitted their answers, since it would have been impossible to identify their answer due to the anonymous nature of the data collection method. The focus group participants, on the other hand, had the freedom to stop participating and leave the focus group at any time. However, it was not possible to eliminate their individual comments in the recording as this would require destroying the entire audio recording. I committed to not analysing their comments or reporting them in this research, if they wished their contribution to the focus groups to be removed.

4.6.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

I ensured the participants of their anonymity and of confidentiality. First of all, the questionnaire was anonymous, and their responses were not identifiable. However, as the questionnaire was also used to recruit potential participants for the focus groups, only the people who wished to participate were asked to leave their contact details (email address). This information was only accessible to the researcher.

For focus groups participants, pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity. However, it is likely that the participants can still recognise each other by reading transcript due to their participation in the research. The selection of pseudonyms was based on the participants' choices. Based on the data collected, the majority of participants in China chose "random" names that had no association with their real names, hence making it unlikely to reveal their identities. However, some of them had chosen unique or humorous nicknames that might be identifiable; these names were further anonymised by being replaced with different ones. Most of the participants in the UK chose to use their real first name or a shortened form of it as their pseudonym. Therefore, to ensure anonymity, the focus group participants in the UK

were further anonymised by labelling them with the first letter of the pseudonym they chose (if it was close to their real name).

4.6.4 Data security

All the data (electronic or physical) collected was kept securely. The electronic data was stored in a password protected computer while the physical documents (such as fieldnotes, feedback sheets) were stored in a locker which only the researcher could access only. All forms of data will be stored for 10 years then destroyed.

4.7 Reflexivity

Reflexivity has become a crucial method in establishing trustworthiness and credibility in qualitative research (Berger, 2015). Although my research is not purely qualitative, I am inspired by the questioning of reflexivity and researcher's subjectivity to show research rigour. According to Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 5) 'reflexivity involves the practice of critical reflection on your role as researcher, and your research practice and process', highlighting the impact of the researcher on the research.

Reflecting on the research process, my social positions such as my gender, race, identity and life experiences, have affected my research. For example, as a Chinese international student who has studied both in China and the UK, it was fairly easy for me to reach out to potential participants. Moreover, it is said that participants may be more willing to open up to the researcher who they think is sympathetic to their situations (De Tona, 2006). As a female PhD student who not only is close in age but also shares similar educational and cultural backgrounds with the participants to some degree, they may feel more comfortable expressing their views. As can be seen in some of the transcripts that appear in this thesis, many participants in both countries seemed to have 'no filter' during the focus group discussion: they would use slang terms, sometimes offensive language; express somewhat critical comments towards school or teachers; or address controversial political topics. All these characteristics made their conversations appear natural and authentic. However, it is also worth considering the observer effect as I was present, and the participants were being recorded: it is possible that the participants might have behaved differently than they normally would and potentially exaggerate their social media learning experiences to what

they think I wanted to hear. This is not to undermine my participants' efforts but to acknowledge that my research might be affected by these factors. At the same time, I was able to examine and compare the qualitative data with the quantitative data to offset possible observer effects.

In addition, my data analysis process has also been affected by my research ability, experiences and even my personal values. For example, the quantitative data collected in this research could have been presented and analysed differently by different researchers. Moreover, my subjectivity has certainly played a part: for example, as I employed thematic analysis for my qualitative data, the coding and theme forming process can be seen as subjective. However, researcher subjectivity should not be seen as a problem to get rid of but treated as a resource in the analytic process (Gough & Madill, 2012). Just as Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 13) put it, "subjectivity is at the heart of reflexive TA practice"; although I would not call my approach to my qualitative data analysis as RTA, I do agree that acknowledging and reflecting on my researcher subjectivity is important. Hence, I cannot separate the subjectivity in this research which is also in line with the philosophical stance of this research as discussed in the beginning of this chapter.

Chapter 5: Results and analysis: China

5.1 Introduction of this chapter

This chapter focuses on reporting the results and analysis for the study conducted in China, with data collected from the university students in China (hereafter Chinese respondents/participants). The chapter commences by presenting the questionnaire findings, firstly the quantitative results (close-ended questions) and then the qualitative findings (open-ended questions). This is followed by the themes emerged from the analysis of the focus group. Finally, a summary is provided at the end of this chapter, organised according to the research questions posed by this study and based on the comparison and discussion of the key findings from the quantitative and qualitative data together.

5.2 Questionnaire findings

5.2.1 Overview of the questionnaire responses received

The Chinese questionnaire generated 102 responses in total. However, for the purposes of this analysis, three responses were excluded due to the respondents not belonging to the target audience (undergraduate students). Consequently, the total number of valid responses considered for this study is 99 (N=99). In terms of the qualitative data collected from the two open-ended questions, fewer responses were recorded due to being optional. Nevertheless, a total of 60 and 59 responses were received respectively for the two open-ended questions though a few responses were excluded due to missing information (e.g., blank answers). Thus, the final number of valid responses to the open-ended questions were: 58 responses for open-ended Q1, 57 responses for Q2. Collectively, these textual responses contributed to a total of 1437 Chinese characters (Hanzi), with an average of approximately 12 words per response. Considering this questionnaire had 99 valid responses as a whole, 58 and 57 responses recorded for each open-ended question indicate a response rate of over 50%, highlighting the active engagement of participants in providing detailed and comprehensive feedback.

5.2.2 Demographics

The demographic information collected through the questionnaire are the participants' age, gender, discipline and year of study. With regards to gender, over half (62.6%) of the

questionnaire respondents identified as female due to sampling methods. This gender distribution (as shown in Table 5.1) does not represent the gender composition of this specific university in China. Respondents were provided with the opportunity to report other gender identities, such as non-binary but no such responses were captured in the data.

Table 5.1 Frequency table showing the genders of Chinese questionnaire respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage %
Female	62	62.6
Male	37	37.4
Total	99	100.0

The subsequent tables (Table 5.2, Table 5.3, and Table 5.4) collectively show the frequency distribution concerning the age groups and year of study of the participants who completed the questionnaire.

Table 5.2 Frequencies and percentages of different age groups of Chinese questionnaire respondents

Age group	Frequency	Percentage %
Under 18	4	4.0
18-20	82	82.8
21-23	11	11.1
24-26	2	2.0
Over 26	0	0.0
Total	99	100.0

Table5.3 Frequencies and percentages of different year of study of Chinese questionnaire respondents

Year of Study	Frequency	Percentage
First year	57	57.6
Second year	27	27.3
Third year	13	13.1
Fourth year	2	2.0
Other	0	0.0
Total	99	100.0

Table 5.4 Frequencies and percentages of different age groups in different year of study of the Chinese questionnaire respondents

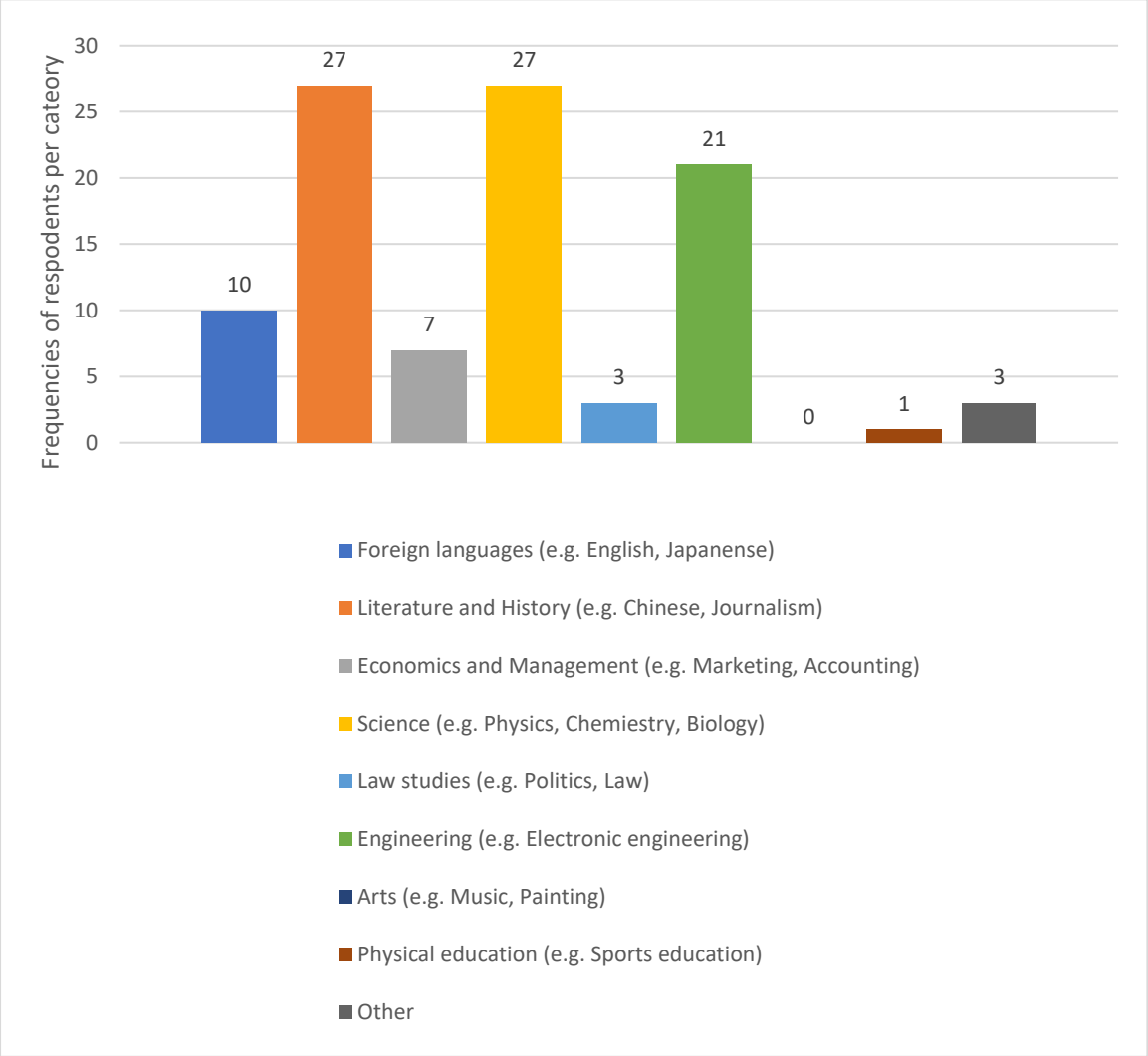
Age group	First year	Second year	Third year	Fourth year
Under18	4	0	0	0
18-20	51	22	9	0
21-23	1	5	4	1
24-26	1	0	0	1
Total	57	27	13	2

When examining the tables above, we can see that an overwhelming proportion (82.8%) of the total population were aged between 18 to 20 years old and more than half (57.6%) of the population were found to be first year students. In China, the typical age for individuals to commence their university education is at the age of 18 (see Chapter 2.1.1), which explains why the majority of the questionnaire respondents were in the 18-20 age group. Due to the fact that over half of the respondents were first-year students, these individuals were still in the early stages of their higher education experience. This relative newness to the university setting may have an impact on their perspectives and opinions regarding social media usage.

In relation to the respondents' discipline, Figure 5.1 below summarises the distribution of respondents across various academic disciplines. The analysis of Figure 5.1 reveals that the "Science" and "Literature and History" had the highest number of participants, with both disciplines having an equal representation of 27 respondents each. This indicates that a considerable portion of the participant pool had academic backgrounds or interests in these fields of study. Following "Science" and "Literature and History", the second most represented group of respondents consisted of 21 individuals studying engineering-related subjects. Additionally, there were three responses recorded in the "Other" option. Upon checking on each individual answer, the three respondents were studying "Midwifery", "Ideological and Political Education" and "Tourism". Only one respondent was studying physical education and no participants from arts-related fields were included in the study. These low numbers and absence of representation in these specific disciplines indicate that the findings may not fully capture the perspectives and experiences of physical education or arts students. Despite the limited representation of these disciplines, the study comprised respondents from a relatively diverse academic background. This is evident in the similar numbers of participants from humanities subjects and science subjects. The comparable

representation of these two broad academic categories suggests a degree of diversity within the sample.

Figure 5.1. Frequencies of disciplines of the Chinese questionnaire respondents. N=99



Based on the analysis of the demographic information provided earlier, it becomes evident that the Chinese questionnaire respondents were a cohort of young adults, with a significant majority (82.8%) falling within the age range of 18-20 years old. Additionally, 57.6% of the total respondents were identified as first-year students, signifying a notable representation of individuals who were relatively new to the university setting. Furthermore, the recruited participants were predominantly female (62.6%) compared to male students (37.4%). Although there was limited representation from arts and physical education backgrounds, the remaining respondents encompassed a diverse range of majors, spanning across natural

sciences to arts and humanities subjects. This diverse academic representation enables a broader examination of perspectives and experiences related to various disciplines.

5.2.3 General user habits and digital environment

5.2.3.1 Accessibility

Accessibility here refers to the practical aspects of the internet use (connections and devices) and the respondents' self-rated internet accessibility (the corresponding questionnaire items are Q6-8).

Table 5.5 displayed the frequencies[22] in modes of internet connections selected by the Chinese questionnaire respondents. This was one of a number of multiple choice questions where respondents could select more than one answer. Thus, while the total number of the questionnaire responses included in this analysis is 99, the total numbers of responses (in Table 5.5) exceed 99. It is evident that some participants have selected more than one option for this particular question. In addition to this, in the same Table 5.5, the "Percent" of each internet connection mode was calculated out of the total responses of the data set. However, the "Percent of Cases" indicates the frequency of each response (different ways of connecting to the internet as in this context) that have been selected by the 99 respondents. Thus, the sum of the "Percent of Cases" in Table 5.5 is over 100%, which is another indicator that some respondents have chosen more than one response. Other multiple-choice questions included in this analysis follow the same pattern as explained here.

Table 5.5 shows that Wi-Fi is the most widely chosen method of internet connection among the respondents. A significant majority (78.8%) indicated Wi-Fi as their preferred means of accessing the internet. Interestingly, a small number of respondents expressed uncertainty by selecting "unsure" as one of their responses. This could potentially be attributed to unfamiliarity with the terminologies related to internet connections. It is possible that individuals may be accustomed to using the internet without having a clear understanding of how it is set up or connected.

[22] It is worth pointing out that the 'N' in Table 5.5 is not the total numbers of respondents but the total numbers of 'choices' received for this multiple-choice question, and we can see that 139 responses were received.

As previously mentioned, the question allowing for multiple responses and the data indicates that some respondents selected more than one answer for this particular question on internet connections. Thus, the data was further analysed in SPSS. Table 5.6 illustrates the numbers of response(s) selected by the respondents, with number 1, 2 and 3 indicating the number of responses selected. For example, number "2" in Table 5.6 means that people have selected two responses as their answer to this question. In this way, based on the results of Table 5.6, 65.7% of the population had just one way of connecting to the internet, 28.3% of the population connected using two methods and 6.1% used three. In other words, about one third of respondents were found to have more than one means of accessing the internet. This analysis further indicates the diversity of methods used by participants to connect to the internet, with considerable numbers of participants using multiple options, based on their surroundings or preferences.

Table 5.5 Ways of Internet Connections: frequencies (CN)

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Ways of Internet Connections_CN	Phone line dial-up	17	12.2%	17.2%
	Ethernet	31	22.3%	31.3%
	Wi-Fi	78	56.1%	78.8%
	Unsure	13	9.4%	13.1%
Total		139	100.0%	140.4%

Table 5.6 numbers selected ways of internet connections(CN)

Number of internet connections	Frequency	Percent
1	65	65.7
2	28	28.3
3	6	6.1
Total	99	100.0

In terms of electronic devices owned by the respondents, an overwhelming majority (98%) indicated that they possessed at least one mobile phone. PC[23] was also selected, with 71.7%

[23] In the Chinese version of the questionnaire, it did not specify PC/laptop but a generic term equivalent to computer.

of the total sample reporting owning a PC. While respondents had the option to mention other devices not explicitly listed in the questionnaire under the "other" category, no such responses were received. As with Table 5.5 on internet connections, the “N” in Table 5.7 also stands for the number of total responses (total numbers of devices in this case). This means that the 99 respondents had at least 191 devices between them. Of these devices, about half were mobile phones and over a third were PCs.

Table 5.8 presents the findings regarding the ownership of multiple electronic devices among the respondents. These findings support the observation that only 27.3% of the sample reported owning a single electronic device, indicating that just under three-quarters of the sample possessed more than one device. In other words, the vast majority (72.7%) of respondents owned multiple electronic devices. Among this group, approximately half (52.5%) of the total sample reported owning two electronic devices. Considering the previous findings on popular devices owned, it can be inferred that these individuals likely owned a combination of a mobile phone and a personal computer (PC). This finding shows that the Chinese questionnaire population does not lack in electronic devices, as a significant portion of the respondents reported owning multiple devices, suggesting that they are well-equipped in terms of technological resources.

Table 5.7 – Devices owned: frequencies (CN)

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Electronic Devices Owned_CN	PC	71	37.2%	71.7%
	Mobile phone	97	50.8%	98.0%
	Tablet	23	12.0%	23.2%
Total		191	100.0%	192.9%

Table 5.8 Device owned: multiple responses selected (CN)

Number of devices	Frequency	Percent
1	27	27.3
2	52	52.5
3	20	20.2
Total	99	100.0

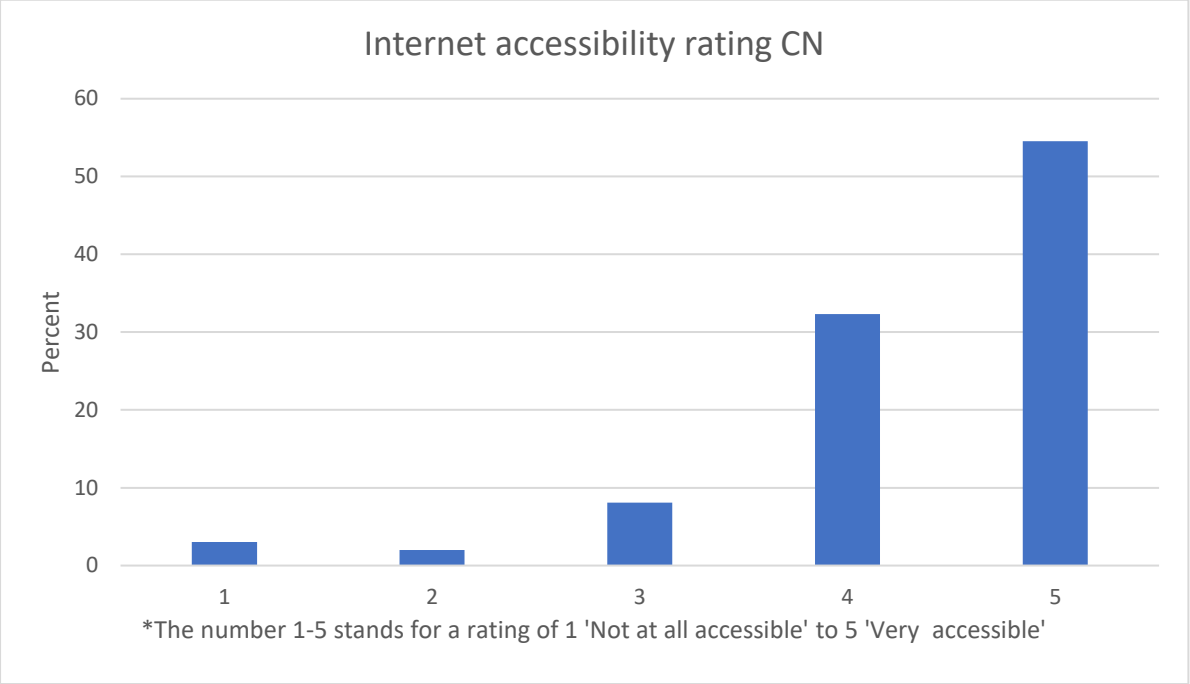
In addition to the practical aspects of internet use discussed earlier, the self-rating of internet accessibility by the respondents provides a valuable supplementary measure for assessing accessibility. The data collected through the 1-5 rating scale was treated as interval data since the participants were provided with specific instructions on the meaning and interpretation of the numbers 1-5. As a result, the mean and average values of the data were given primary focus in this analysis. These statistical measures provide a central tendency and summary of the participants' overall ratings, offering valuable insights into the collective perception of internet accessibility among the respondents.

Table 5.9 shows us the results of internet access ratings. We can see that the most frequently chosen rating by the respondents is 5 which means very accessible. The mean response was 4.33, suggesting that most respondents rate their ability to connect to the internet as accessible to very accessible. The most frequent value (mode) was 5, meaning that the majority of participants felt that the internet was very accessible to them. Additionally, we can see from figure 5.2 that more than half of the sample rated the internet as very accessible to them. These results consistently confirm that the internet is widely perceived as highly accessible by the majority of the participants. This observation aligns with the previous findings which indicated that a significant proportion of the respondents had access to Wi-Fi and owned multiple electronic devices.

Table 5.9 Mean and mode of internet accessibility rating (CN)

N	99
Mean	4.33
Mode	5

Figure 5.2 Frequencies of Chinese questionnaire respondents' Internet accessibility ratings on a scale of 1-5



In summary, the findings related to the practical aspects of internet use indicate that the Chinese university students in this study reside in an environment where internet connectivity is seldom an issue. Additionally, a significant number of participants owned multiple electronic devices, with mobile phones being particularly prevalent (98% ownership). Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that the majority of respondents perceive the internet to be highly accessible. The combination of reliable internet connections and the widespread availability of electronic devices contributes to the overall positive perception of internet accessibility among the surveyed students.

5.2.3.2 Key platforms

China has a unique social media landscape as discussed in Chapter 2. This distinctive situation has also reflected on the questionnaire findings in terms of the social media platforms used by the respondents (as shown in Table 5.10). The findings indicate that Chinese social media platforms, specifically WeChat and QQ, exhibited significant popularity among the respondents. In contrast, Western counterparts such as Facebook and Instagram had a relatively smaller user base among the surveyed individuals. This suggests a preference for

local social media platforms over their Western counterparts among the study participants. For example, Table 5.10 shows that QQ and WeChat were reported as being used by 98% of respondents while non-Chinese social media platforms in Table 5.10 such as Facebook and Instagram, reported a much lower user rate (all under 10%). Respondents also used many social media platforms at the same time. Table 5.11 reveals that almost all respondents (except for one) reported using multiple social media platforms. Specifically, 33.3% of the population used three platforms, while 25.3% used four platforms. These findings suggest that the respondents engaged with multiple social media platforms, in particular Chinese platforms.

Table 5.10 Frequencies of selected social media platforms by Chinese questionnaire respondents

		Responses		
		N	Percent	Percent of Cases
Slected _platforms_CN[a]	WeChat	97	27.6%	98.0%
	QQ	97	27.6%	98.0%
	Weibo	54	15.3%	54.5%
	Douyin	47	13.4%	47.5%
	Zhihu	30	8.5%	30.3%
	Facebook	9	2.6%	9.1%
	Instagram	8	2.3%	8.1%
	Twitter	3	0.9%	3.0%
	WhatsApp	1	0.3%	1.0%
	YouTube	4	1.1%	4.0%
	Others	2	0.6%	2.0%
Total		352	100.0%	355.6%

Table 5.11 Numbers of selected social media platforms (CN)

Number of platforms selected	Frequency	Percent
1.00	**1**	**1.0**
2.00	**21**	**21.2**
3.00	**33**	**33.3**
4.00	**25**	**25.3**
5.00	**12**	**12.1**
6.00	**3**	**3.0**
7.00	**1**	**1.0**
8.00	**2**	**2.0**
9.00	**1**	**1.0**
Total	**99**	**100.0**

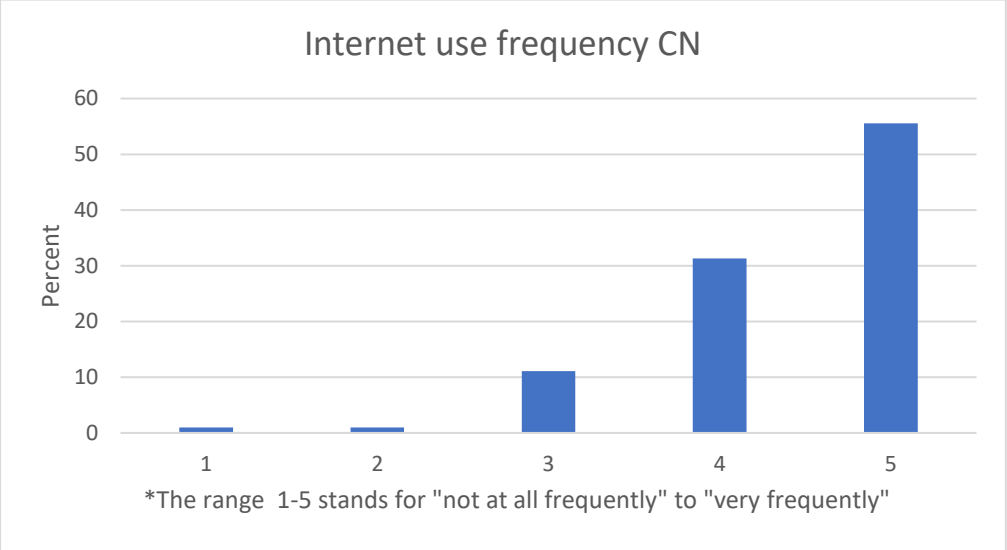
5.2.3.3 Frequency of use

This section is dedicated to examining the frequency of internet and social media usage among the respondents. To assess internet usage frequency, a 1 to 5 rating scale was employed, with ratings ranging from "not at all frequently" to "very frequently". Analysis of the data presented in Table 5.12 reveals that the most commonly selected rating was "5," indicating a perception of using the internet very frequently. Moreover, the mean rating falls within the range of "frequently" to "very frequently." This is further supported by the bar chart depicted in figure 5.3, which clearly illustrates that more than half of the sample reported using the internet very frequently.

Table 5.12 Mean and mode of internet accessibility rating (CN)

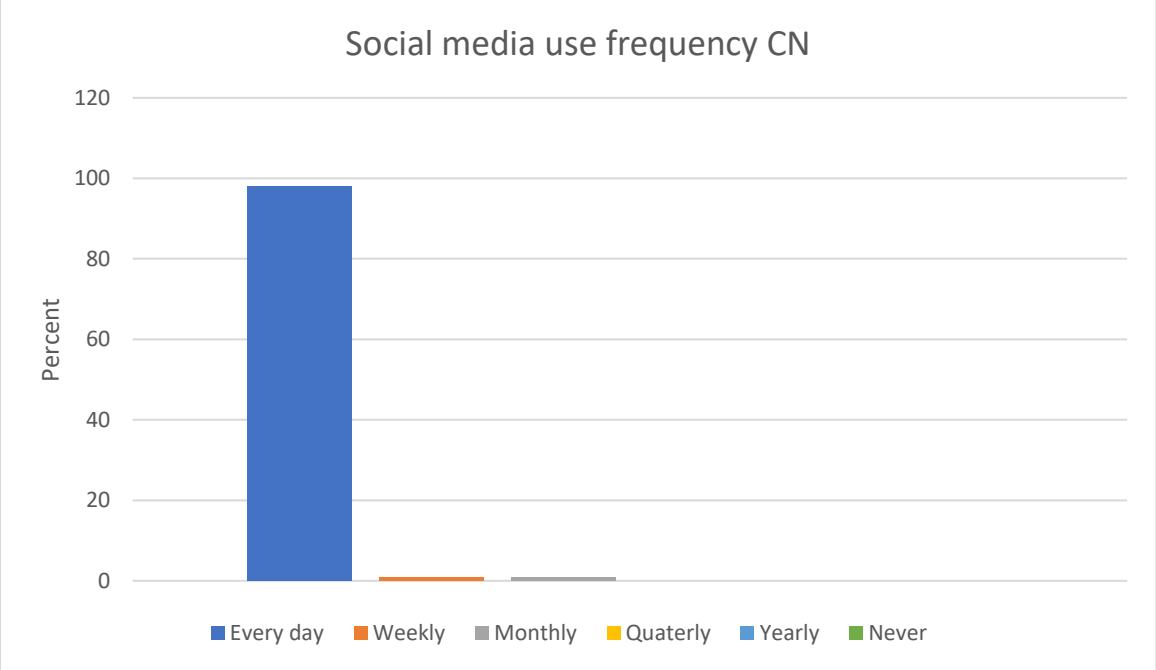
N	99
Mean	4.39
Mode	5.00

Figure 5.3 Chinese (CN) respondents' internet use: frequency ratings on a scale of 1-5



Consistent with the frequent internet usage reported earlier, Chinese respondents also exhibited a high level of engagement with social media platforms. As shown in Figure 5.4, an overwhelming majority of 97% indicated daily use of social media. This frequency of internet and social media usage suggests a high level of familiarity and regularity among these Chinese university students, as nearly all of them use social media on a daily basis.

Figure 5.4 Social media use frequency (CN)



5.2.3.4 Perceptions of use (reasons, advancements, statements)

This section focuses on the respondents' judgements and perceptions towards their social media use. This includes the purposes for using social media, level of proficiency as a social media user and the statement that most aligns with their social media use.

The respondents in this study use social media for various purposes. Table 5.13 provides an overview of the frequencies at which each reason was selected by the respondents. Among these reasons, interests and hobbies, as well as socialising, emerged as the most popular, collectively accounting for approximately two-thirds of the total responses.

The results of the multiple responses analysis presented in Table 5.14 indicate that only 21.2% of the total sample selected a single reason for using social media. From the 99 participants, a total of 241 reasons for using social media were recorded. This suggests that the majority of respondents employ social media for a combination of purposes, primarily driven by personal interests and hobbies, as well as social interactions. This also echoed McQail (2010) view that media products can serve multiple purposes or gratifications. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the descriptions of the reasons/purposes for using social media in the questionnaire were relatively concise. Thus, further investigation and cross-referencing with qualitative data was required. For instance, the purpose "academic" warrants a deeper exploration to understand how students utilise social media specifically for academic purposes and what the term "academic" signifies to them. The qualitative aspect of the research design provided valuable insights into the nuanced ways in which social media is employed within an academic context by the respondents.

Table 5.13 Frequencies of reasons for using social media by Chinese respondents.

		Responses		Percent of
		N	Percent	Cases
Selected reasons_CN	Social	84	34.9%	84.8%
	Business	17	7.1%	17.2%
	Academic	52	21.6%	52.5%
	Interests/hobbies	88	36.5%	88.9%
Total		241	100.0%	243.4%

Table 5.14 Numbers of selected reasons for using social media (CN)

		Frequency	Percent
Numbers of selected reasons	1.00	21	21.2
	2.00	28	28.3
	3.00	36	36.4
	4.00	14	14.1
	Total	99	100.0

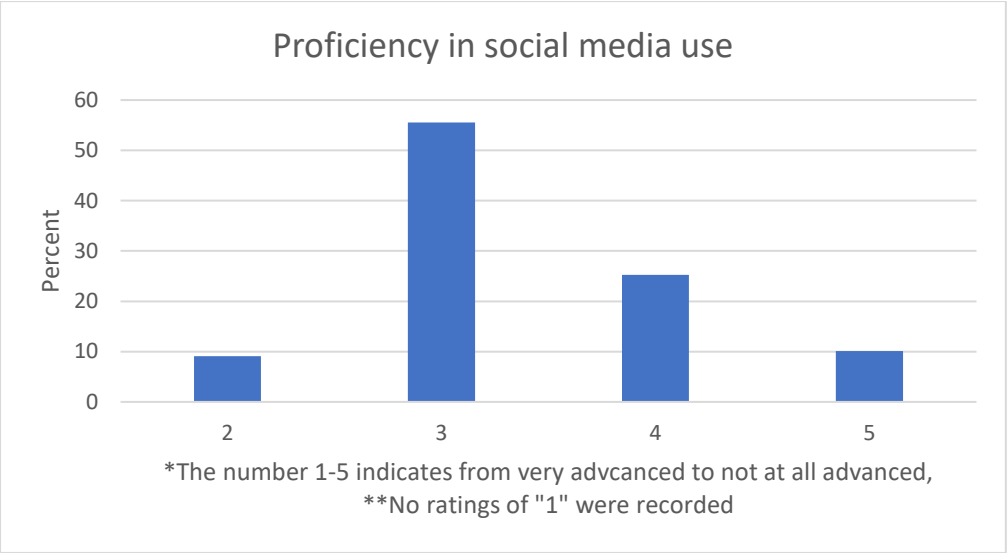
In addition, participants were asked to rate their perceived level of proficiency as social media users on a scale of 1 to 5. However, it is worth noting that the concept of "proficiency" was not properly defined in the questionnaire. Nevertheless, the data still provides some useful insights. Table 5.15 presents the mean and mode of the ratings, indicating that the most frequently selected rating was "3," which represents a neutral stance regarding their perceived level of proficiency in using social media. While further clarification on the concept of proficiency would have been beneficial, this data sheds light on the participants' self-perceived competence in utilizing social media platforms.

Table 5.15 *Mean and mode of social media advancement rating (CN)*

N	99
Mean	3.36
Mode	3

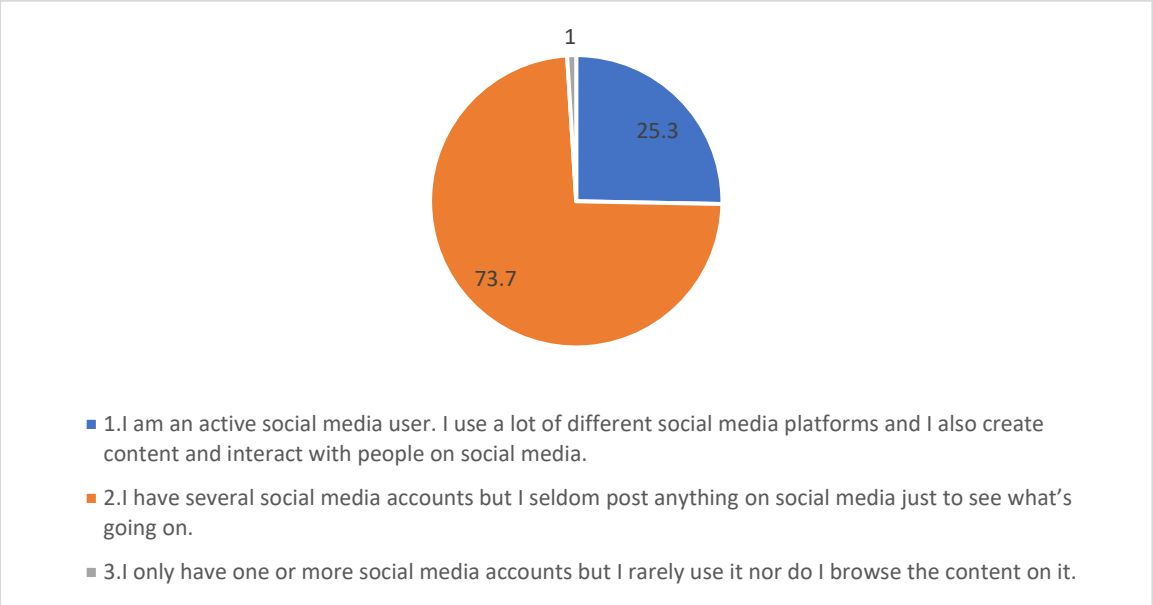
Figure 5.5 provides additional insights into the distribution of ratings selected by the participants. Once again, rating "3" was the most commonly chosen option, indicating a moderate level of self-assessed proficiency in using social media. Less than 10% of the total sample rated themselves as "2," while no participants selected the lowest rating of "1," as illustrated by the absence of this data point in the bar chart. These findings suggest that the respondents tended to be somewhat reserved in their perceived mastery of social media usage. However, it is noteworthy that every participant acknowledged possessing at least some level of proficiency, as indicated by the absence of respondents selecting the lowest rating out social media.

Figure 5.5 Proficiency in social media use (CN)



With regards to the participants' social media usage, a significant proportion of respondents identified themselves as "observers" rather than "creators." This implies that while they utilise social media platforms, their activities primarily involve reading and browsing content rather than actively contributing or posting. Figure 5.6 illustrates that 73.7% of the respondents agreed with statement two, which suggests that they have multiple social media accounts but rarely engage in posting. However, it is important to acknowledge that the design of these statements could potentially lead respondents in a particular direction, as they were required to choose a statement provided by the researcher.

Figure 5.6 Statements about social media use (CN)



In conclusion, the quantitative analysis of the Chinese questionnaire responses provided valuable insights into the respondents' views of their social media use. The findings indicate that the respondents utilize social media for various purposes, including socialising and pursuing their interests and hobbies. Moreover, they demonstrated a general familiarity with social media, with the majority considering themselves to have average or above-average proficiency. The analysis of social media usage statements further revealed that the respondents tend to have multiple social media accounts but do not frequently engage in posting content. These findings collectively contribute to understanding how these Chinese university students perceive and utilize social media platforms.

5.2.4 Social media and learning

In this section, I explore the role of social media in learning. Firstly, I examine the findings related to attitudes towards social media for learning, which were assessed using a Likert scale comprising 10 statements. Following this, I look at the qualitative component of the questionnaire, which involved two open-ended questions. These qualitative responses provide valuable insights into the participants' perspectives on social media's impact on their learning.

5.2.4.1 Attitudes towards social media for learning

Table 5.16 presents the results of the Likert scale ratings for the 10 statements related to social media and learning. These statements were designed to assess the participants' attitudes towards the use of social media for learning purposes. It is worth noting that some of the statements addressed the same topic but were intentionally formulated in an opposite manner, allowing for cross-examination of the results.

Upon reviewing the results in Table 5.16, it becomes evident that the respondents generally held positive attitudes towards social media as a tool for learning and perceived it as beneficial to their learning experiences. Notably, statement 10 garnered significant support, with 56.6% of the total sample agreeing or strongly agreeing that social media has the potential to enhance learning. Approximately half of the respondents agreed, and 27.3% strongly agreed, that their use of social media for learning is driven by their personal interests. This finding aligns with the earlier finding where many participants cited interests and hobbies as one of their primary reasons for using social media.

On the other hand, a considerable proportion (44.4%) of the respondents agreed that social media can be a distraction from their studies, with 12.1% expressing strong agreement. In contrast, for statement 9, which reflects a negative view of social media's impact on learning, 34.3% of the sample disagreed, while 40.4% maintained a neutral stance.

These findings collectively demonstrate that the respondents generally perceive social media as a useful tool for learning, driven by personal interests, while acknowledging the potential distraction it may pose. These results provide quantitative insights into the participants' attitudes worth further checking with the qualitative data to gain a comprehensive understanding of their views on social media and learning.

Table 5.16 Percentages of 10 Likert scale questions on social media and learning (CN)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Stronly disagree
1.Social media is useful for learning.	23.2%	47.5%	26.3%	1%	2%
2.Social media helps with my university work.	24.2%	44.4%	25.3%	5.1%	1%
3.Social media should be allowed in formal learning situations, e.g. in the classroom.	22.2%	31.3%	30.3%	13.1%	3%
4.I can learn things that cannot be learnt in formal education.	24.2%	48.5%	20.2%	6.1%	1%
5.Social media is a distraction from my university studies.	12.1%	44.4%	34.3%	7.1%	2%
6.My use of social media for learning is based on my own interests.	27.3%	50.5%	19.2%	2%	1%
7.I use social media spontaneously to learn new things.	21.2%	46.5%	28.3%	3%	1%
8.I like to use social media to learn.	18.2%	41.4%	33.3%	6.1%	1%
9.I don't think social media is for learning /I am sceptical of social media's potential for learning.	9.1%	13.1%	40.4%	34.3%	3%
10.I think we can use social media to learn/I am positive about social media's potential for learning.	24.2%	56.6%	16.2%	2%	1%

5.2.4.2 Ways of using social media for learning:

Information seeking

In coding the written responses, looking/searching for information, resources as well as getting latest news information were categorised under information seeking. Though the content the students were looking for might vary, I decided they can all be considered as forms of information seeking.

A short Chinese phrase "*Cha Zi Liao*" which can be translated into "searching for resources" appeared repeatedly among the written responses received. However, most responses in this category remained descriptive and it is hard to know what "resource" they were referring to. Occasionally, participants mentioned the app or platform name they used for such purposes e.g., "*Baidu*[24] *stuff that I don't know*" or the device they used for such practise: "*utilise mobile phone searching for information*" as well as the purpose: "*I can look for answers with the (assignment) questions that I don't know how to answer*". Based on these answers, alongside the scenario proposed by the open-ended question (examples of using social media for learning), this is most probably "Cha Zi Liao" probably suggested for looking up information for their study requirements such as assignments etc. In addition to this, some stated that they would use social media for news and current affairs, for example, "*using social media read latest news at any time anywhere*"; "*I use Zhihu to watch the hot (news) topics*".

Attending online courses

Some respondents referred to attending online courses as examples of using social media for learning. As with the previous category, many participants did not further explain what type of courses and what were the courses but provided a generic answer such as "attending online courses". Similarly, a few participants briefly mentioned the device they used for online courses (mobile phone) or the platform names (e.g., "Weibo" or "Zhidao"). However, when it came to the platform "Zhidao", most of the responses contained the Chinese verb "Shua" instead of a generic, neutral term as "attending" or "having" online classes. Shua" is Chinese slang, literally a brush (noun) or to brush (verb), usually referring to doing something quickly in haste. In this context, it indicates some degree of negative attitude towards these online courses as these respondents probably clicked and scrolled through these online courses just to 'get the job done'. One respondent stated that they used Ruidafakao[25] to watch law exam videos but most responses making reference to "Zhidao" used the word "Shua". These answers from the open-ended questions alone are not enough to explain what kind of online courses were being accessed or why there seemed to be a somewhat negative attitude towards such courses on the platform named "Zhidao". This ambiguity was later addressed in the post focus group interview as I asked the participants questions about this platform and

[24] Search engine name, similar to Google
[25] App name

the courses it provided. According to the participants, they are expected to sign up and finish some courses on Zhidao as part of their module/courses requirement, therefore it is mandatory.

English language learning

Many of the responses about social media and learning made reference to English language learning, especially English vocabulary. For example, students stated that they used:

> *"Momo[26] for memorising English words";*
> *"memorising English vocabulary, learning English";*
> *"Everyday I use Baicizhan[27] to Daka [28];*
> *"Using Shanbei [29]to learn English words,…";*
> *"Jinshanciba[30] when I found unknown English words";*
> *"Learning English on Douyin";*
> *"(I use) Baicizhan to remember English words".*

We can see from the above examples that there is a strong focus on English vocabulary. Several English learning app/platforms such as 'Baicizhan', 'Shanbei' were mentioned by the respondents. Moreover, respondents used these English learning platforms frequently as they referred to their usage as "*Daka* /Clock in" which indicates that this is something they do every daily and habitually. I suggested in the context chapter that most Chinese university students face a series of exams and qualifications during their university study, especially English language tests such as CET4 and CET6. Further qualitative discussion of this context was raised in the focus group findings where the participants further explained their reasons and motives behind this dutiful checking in on these apps/platforms to learn English.

In addition to designated English learning apps/platforms like "Baicizhan," respondents also mentioned utilising apps/platforms such as "Weibo" and "Douyin" for English learning, even though these platforms are not specifically designed for that purpose. However, the exact methods and approaches they use to learn English through these apps/platforms remain

[26] app name
[27] app name, the name literally translates as 'killing hundreds of (English) words'
[28] *Daka*, (Eng. check in, literally translation swipe cards,) is a Chinese slang, derived from mimicking the scenarios when the employees register their attendance every day by swiping their ID cards)
[29] app name
[30] app name

unclear based on this data alone. The focus group participants provided more detailed insights on English learning topics, which will be further discussed in later sections.

Personal hobbies and interests

Some respondents mentioned using specific apps/platforms to learn things related to their interests and hobbies. For example, one respondent mentioned using Bilibili to learn Photoshop and drawing, while another mentioned using Aiyuke to learn badminton skills. Another respondent mentioned learning dances on Douyin, and someone else mentioned following their idol on Weibo for inspiration. These examples highlight the diverse interests of the respondents and how they creatively utilise different platforms for learning. One interesting finding is the use of Bilibili, a video-based platform known for anime, for learning Photoshop skills, which demonstrates the innovative ways in which participants leverage platforms for their learning needs.

University- related communication

Several respondents highlighted the aspect of sharing, communicating and socialising with others on social media apps/platforms for study-related activities. For instance, one respondent mentioned using various platforms to share different study materials, while another mentioned using WeChat and QQ to discuss study-related topics. One respondent specifically mentioned asking study-related questions to others on QQ. These responses indicate that these participants have a broader understanding of education and perceive collaborative interactions with their peers through social media as a form of learning.

Furthermore, unlike the heavy use of emails for communication as seen in the UK, social media platforms such as QQ or WeChat were also used for university communications, despite users having to use their personal accounts.

> *"sending messages in the group chat (to the classmates)";*
> *"teachers sharing documents on QQ"* ;
> *"our teachers share documents on QQ";*
> *"a lot of notification/information from the 'up'* [31] *to the 'bottom''.* [32]

[31] explanation: 'up 'as a metaphor for teachers or the authorities from the university
[32] students themselves

The provided examples illustrate the use of social media for university-related communication, including peer communication and the sharing of teaching and learning materials. While these examples may not necessarily involve the respondents themselves actively engaging in learning activities, they demonstrate the importance of social media as a platform for interactions with others regarding educational matters. Although this type of communication may not constitute formal learning practices, it undoubtedly contributes to the overall support and enhancement of these students' university teaching and learning experiences.

In summary, when it comes to examples of using social media for learning, several broad categories of learning practices were identified: Information seeking; Attending online courses; English language learning; personal hobbies and interests; university related communication. This shows that these Chinese university students are actively using social media for various learning purposes and in learning spaces. On the one hand, some learning practices such as attending mandatory online courses on certain platforms, are part of the requirements of their formal education. At the same time, mandatory or not, these students learning practises with social media apps/platforms are also closely tied with their degree and career development. For example, the common practice of learning English le on their phone could be a consequence of the major English exams they must pass in order to complete their degree and improve employability in the future. More importantly, some of the responses included informal communication with their peers (e.g., messaging classmates about study-related questions) and teaching staff as a way of using social media for learning. This is interesting as it shows that respondents are recognising these “informal” practices as also a way of learning. Although some confusion remained, I tried to address this as much as possible in the follow-up focus groups, so as to provide a fuller picture of these Chinese university social media learning experience.

5.2.4.3 Benefits of using social media for learning

Rich resources available

Many participants expressed the benefits of using social media for learning by highlighting the abundance of information and resources available online. However, similar to the first practice of using social media for learning—information seeking outlined in previous section, the specific types of information and resources they were referring to remained unclear at

this stage, as the answers provided were generally brief and descriptive in nature. For example, responses such as *"rich resources"; "the resources are rich"; "a lot of information"* did not specify what kind of information or which app/platform. However, such responses occurred across the whole dataset, indicating that the availability of rich resources is seen as a key benefit of using social media for learning. By categorising and emphasising the accessibility of diverse and abundant resources, the value that social media can bring to the learning process becomes evident.

Convenience

Alongside rich recourses, many respondents emphasised the convenience of using social media for learning. The Chinese four-word idiom 'Suishisuidi' (Eng. Anytime, anywhere) was used by several respondents. For instance: "(I*) can study anytime, anywhere, can take advantage of my fragmented time to study*". This 'anytime-anywhere' characteristic of utilising digital technologies is appreciated as hugely convenient, as users are no longer restricted by time or location, as long as they have access to the internet (sometimes some app/software allows you to download resources beforehand so you can use it offline) and an appropriate device. This, to some extent, also facilitates learner mobility. As one respondent commented: "Convenient, a lot of resources are 'mobile'". Although I was unable to confirm what exactly the respondent meant by 'mobile', it is highly likely that he or she was referring to the easy transfer of resources on social media from device to device, or to the fact that with a portable device and access, one can study anywhere.

Such flexibility also facilitates self-directed learning, allowing not only freedom in time and space but also pace, content and even learning styles. One respondent explained that it was 'convenient… in terms of (I can) learn stuff that I am interested in and learn by myself'. This answer suggests that using social media confers more freedom and agency to pick and choose what the individual user wants to learn and how to learn. Given that the students can learn anywhere (mobility) and can choose how and what to learn (autonomy) even on their phone, on social media apps/platforms, the use of social media for learning seems to be blurring the boundary between formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Supporting university learning

Unlike previous categories where individual responses could be quite descriptive, the responses under this category contained more specific information. Responses like *"(I)can learn what I cannot learn in the university"; "(I) can access to some knowledge that is not printed in textbooks"; "benefits, can (help to) memorise the content during the class"* have demonstrated how the use of social media platforms can support and supplement to their learning in the university.

Enabling communication and connections

Responses gathered also highlight the benefit of communication with others under this category. This could simply consist of asking other people for help, e.g., "Asking other people when I have something I do not understand". Although this respondent did not disclose what which social media app/platform he or she used, he or she thinks it is this communication enabled by social media that has helped his or her studies. Moreover, one respondent noted that "(I) can get to know many like-minded people". Although no further explanation was provided, there is the sense that social media helped this respondent to find people who may have been studying similar subjects or have similar interests, thereby building connections.

5.2.4.4 Challenges of using social media for learning

Distraction and addiction

The most frequent words to be used when describing the challenges of using social media for learning were "distraction", "addiction" and other words similar to "self-control" For example,

> *"…but I will get distracted"; "the disadvantage is that (I) easily get addicted…"; "easily get distracted by the internet"; "…hard to concentrate (because get distracted)"; "…challenges, it's hard to control not to use other entertainment apps…"; "..but when I face the temptation of my phone...it's hard to control"; "the difficulty is I will get addicted to social media"; "..but it also distracts me when I am studying"; "I can't resist using those entertainment apps"; "..(when I hold) my phone in my hand, I will habitually look at other apps";*

Indeed, the findings suggest that despite the benefits social media can bring to learning, it also poses a significant distraction for these students. Responses that highlight this tension, i.e. "it helps learning but also distracts me from learning," indicate a recognition of this

challenge. Furthermore, the respondents' awareness of the need for self-control and discipline while using social media for learning, underscores the potential difficulty in managing their usage effectively.

The quantitative findings from the questionnaire perhaps predicted this as they revealed a high frequency of social media use among Chinese students, with many students utilising multiple platforms. Given these usage patterns, it is understandable that some individuals self-identify as "addicted" to social media. This acknowledgment of addiction implies a lack of control or difficulty in resisting the allure of social media, further highlighting the potential distraction it poses in their learning endeavours.

Difficulties finding the "right" information

Another frequently mentioned challenge is around the difficulties in finding the right information on social media. While the abundance of online resources is considered a benefit, it can complicate the task of locating the "right" information. The "right" information refers to content that aligns with the students' specific study needs. This search for relevant information can also be time-consuming for some respondents due to the numerous resources available online. Moreover, the credibility of the information poses another challenge. Respondents expressed difficulty in distinguishing between accurate and false information, making it challenging to determine the veracity of the content they come across. See for example *"the challenge is I am not sure if some information is legit or not"; "disadvantage: may receive some wrong knowledge"; "too many answers, cannot filter those information"…*All these responses express the difficulties of finding legitimate and trustworthy information. Moreover, one respondent said that *"… sometimes there are completely different answers online, your own thoughts will be influenced by others".*

Financial concerns

Some participants expressed frustration with certain apps/platforms that require payment, such as online courses that require membership or fees. This financial barrier hinders their access to those resources. Furthermore, participants emphasised the importance of having reliable internet access, highlighting it as a potential challenge. They suggested that

app/platform developers could address these concerns by designing platforms specifically tailored to students who may be constrained by their financial circumstances.

School policy

A small number of students mentioned having difficulties using social media apps/platforms for learning because they were simply not allowed to use their phone. As one respondent put it: *"challenges: it's possible that in some situations you are not allowed to use…"* As a researcher, this caught my attention as this is likely to be the policy or rule from their teacher/university which completely undermines the use of phones and therefore, social media. I wondered what reasons might be articulated to justify this and how students would feel about it. These questions were therefore explored during the focus group.

5.2.5 Key questionnaire findings

In summary, the findings from the questionnaire provided initial insights into the internet and social media usage patterns among a group of Chinese university students, as well as their perceptions of social media's role in learning. The descriptive statistics derived from the quantitative data offer an overview of the digital landscape these students inhabited during their undergraduate year and their general internet and social media usage habits.

The Chinese questionnaire respondents comprised young adults in their late teens to early twenties, primarily consisting of first-year students, with a slightly higher representation of females. Therefore, this sample may not reflect the usage and views of the entire population of the university. Respondents had diverse academic backgrounds, spanning humanities to natural sciences disciplines. They resided in an environment where internet access was readily available, based on their self-reported ratings of accessibility, as well as the practical aspects of their internet connections and ownership of electronic devices. Most respondents had Wi-Fi access, and many possessed mobile phones and computers, providing them with the foundation for frequent internet and social media usage.

The data revealed that 98% of the respondents used social media on a daily basis, primarily engaging with Chinese social media platforms. They reported using social media for various purposes, including pursuing personal interests and socialising. The attitudes scale indicates that the majority of respondents held positive attitudes towards using social media for

learning, although they also acknowledged that social media could be a distraction from their studies.

The open-ended question responses provided additional insights into the respondents' own accounts of social media usage and learning, which are further explored when discussing the focus groups. Notably, some respondents mentioned platforms that may not traditionally be considered as "social media" platforms, such as using Baidu as a means of learning through social media. This suggests that these respondents viewed social media as a broader concept that extends beyond conventional social networking sites, encompassing platforms like search engines. Furthermore, the concept of "learning" was also perceived broadly: some individuals referred to attending online courses as learning while others viewed the simple act of searching for information online as a form of learning. The examples provided, such as searching for information, English learning and online classes, further elucidated the diverse purposes for which social media was employed, as indicated in the closed-ended question results.

Moreover, the respondents demonstrated awareness of the benefits of using social media for learning, such as the convenience it offers and the abundance of resources available on social media apps/platforms. However, they also expressed concerns about social media being a distraction or even an addiction. Additionally, tensions arose between these students and their educational institutions due to their use of social media apps/platforms. While the qualitative data in this section provided informative insights, most of the responses were concise, leaving room for further exploration. For example, questions remained regarding why certain phone restrictions were imposed and why respondents used "Zhidao" for online courses, despite not expressing fondness for it. Answers to these questions may be found in the forthcoming section which discusses focus group findings.

5.3 Focus groups findings

5.3.1 Overview and fieldnotes

In this section, I provide a brief description of the focus group participants[33] and refer to fieldnote extracts taken during the data collection process. The intention behind including

[33] I address people who have participates the focus groups as ‘participants’ to differentiate people who have answered the questionnaire (respondents).

these details is to provide a holistic description of the participants involved in the study and the setting in which the focus groups took place. They also illustrate some of my methodological reflections and the process of using information from the discussions to supplement the analysis of the questionnaires. The gender, age and academic disciplines of participants are provided in the subsequent four tables below, corresponding to the five focus groups.

Table 5.17 Chinese focus group one

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Year of study
Yang	Male	19	English	3
Bin	Male	18	Software engineering	1
Cai	Male	19	Software engineering	2
Xu	Male	19	Mathematics	2
Chu	Female	19	Chinese	1
Quan	Female	18	Chinese	1
Lin	Female	18	Biology	1
Xing	Female	18	Software engineering	1

Table 5.18 Chinese focus group two

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Year of study
Luo	Male	18	Chinese	2
Gong	Male	18	Chinese	2
Gon	Female	18	Chinese	3
Lo	Female	18	Chinese	3
Pang	Male	18	Law	1
Ou	Female	18	Politics	3
Mei	Female	18	English	3
Yang	Female	18	Politics	1

Table 5.19 Chinese focus group three

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Year of study
Gan	Male	21	Chinese	2
Hong	Female	19	Chinese	2
Yi	Female	19	English	2
Wang	Female	19	Politics	2
Yang	Male	19	Law	1
Li	Male	20	Law	2
Zhen	Female	19	Politics	2
Lee	Female	19	Politics	2
Qu	Female	20	Chinese	2
Zhao	Female	19	Chinese	2

Table 5.20 Chinese focus group four

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Year of study
Da	Female	18	Chinese	1
Ting	Female	18	Chinese	1
Guo	Female	19	Chinese	1
Xiao	Female	18	Chinese	1
Xuan	Male	19	Chinese	1
He	Female	19	Chinese	1
Cheng	Female	18	Chinese	1

Table 5.21 Chinese focus group five

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Year of study
Wang	Male	20	Mathematics	3
Luo	Male	22	Mathematics	3
Lu	Female	23	English	3
Che	Female	21	Mathematics	3
Chong	Male	19	Engineering	1
Duo	Female	21	Mathematics	3
Wen	Female	21	Mathematics	3

Recruitment to Group one (hereafter CNFG1) was mainly via convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Thus, many participants already knew each other prior to data collection. This may explain why this was also the liveliest group. Apart from Yang who was majoring in English, the rest were studying Chinese and Software Engineering.

Group two (CNFG2) was formed by using contact details collected through the questionnaire. Thus, the participants in this group did not necessarily know other participants personally.

Group three (CNFG3) was also formed by contacting the interested respondents from the questionnaire.

Group four (CNFG4) was formed thanks to the two girls helping me to find their roommates and male friends, as I expressed that I would like to recruit male participants as well. Therefore, all the participants in this group were actually classmates and knew each other very well. Their conversations were full of laughter.

Group five (CNFG5) was formed similar to group one where the main contact in this group was someone I knew and then the main contact brought in more participants.

Some of the fieldnote I've written:

> *Although I was not expected to conduct the focus groups in their classroom, the participants felt this was the most convenient option for them…As soon as I stepped in the classroom, it reminds me of my student days in China, although I haven't studied in this university, but it is somehow so familiar and to be honest, it was worse than the ones I have had because the chair and tables seemed quite old. Perhaps this is just one of the 'bad' classrooms. As we sat down, I saw the big blue pouch with individual pockets have numbers on them hanging in front of the classroom right next to the entrance door. I asked the participants what this was for. They told me, that's where the phones get put once they are taken away! …(March,2019).*
>
> *Oh! I finally knew what this 'Zhidao' is as I've heard so many times! It actually is an online teaching platform that this university somehow 'forces' these students to use. What's even worse, they all seem to be pre-recorded with no real time interactions at all. No wonder they have told me they played it high speed just to get over with it!'… (March,2019).*
>
> *I've came to the realisation that it's good for the participants to kind of know each other so that they would likely to feel more comfortable talking, but sometimes when they know each other too well they started to make too many jokes?... (April,2019).*
>
> *I am definitely fascinated by the fact that these young people know so many apps and platforms! I thought I am still quite 'in touch' with Chinese apps and internet culture but geez! How did they know so many…?(April, 2019).*

These fieldnote extracts show how not only what was said but the environment and throw away remarks helped me to understand some of the comments participants had made in the questionnaire, such as references to the phone banning policy and the "Zhidao" app which was mentioned many times by different participants. The analysis of the focus groups is presented thematically in the next few sections. Last but not the least, it may worth pointing

out that the notion of "social media" was not pre-defined and announced to the participants. Instead, I asked the participants to freely discuss what they think of social media and what they think use social media for learning is like.

5.3.2 The everyday use of social media

5.3.2.1 Always online

The focus group discussion started with a couple of warm-up questions such as 'do you use the internet or social media? If so, how frequently?'. Interestingly, nearly all students in different focus groups mentioned that they used the internet and the social media every day as if it is part of their daily routine. See some examples cited below:

> *"Hmm, I basically use my mobile phone to go on the internet and chat (to people) every day, I also use my Kindle for reading novels and stuff"* (Yang, CNFG 1).
>
> *"Hmm, indeed we all have to use the internet every day, have to use mobile phone every day, sending messages and sharing information and that…" (Pang, CNFG2).*
>
> *"Platforms… QQ, WeChat, just use phone to go on the Internet, every day, frequency, many times a day, just to communicate with other people…" (Li, CNFG3).*

The extracts above come from the beginning of the focus group when participants were briefly talking about their internet and social media use. Although these descriptions were relatively short, it is already apparent that they use the internet and social media every day. As the discussion went further, some participants elaborated on how much time they spent online. See below excerpts of a moment between participants in group four: when 'Da' asked how frequently the group members used social media and the others responded 'always online':

> *Da: How about the frequency?*
> *Xiao: Very frequent.*
> *Da: For example?*
> *Xiao: Everyday*
> *Da: For example? (others: burst of laughter)*
> *Guo: four or five times a day*
> *Yang: You (Guo) only four or five times a day?! How long each time? Isn't it four hours each time (laugh out loud)?!*
> *Xiao: Every day when I have free time.*
> *Xuan: Everyday*

He: Always online
Cheng: Except for sleeping, I am on my socials all the time (laugh).
Yang: Same (laughs)

(Excerpts from CNFG4)

As the above excerpts show, some participants mentioned that they're always online unless they're sleeping. This might sound like an exaggeration but in group five, a similar conversation occurred when they were talking about how often they used social media:

Wen: Shua[34] Weibo?
Chong: Shua/YES, very frequently to be honest.
Lu: Very frequent? Me too! I almost (spent) 24 hours a day (online), for real! I go to sleep at 12 am, woke up at 7am (other than this time) I am always scrolling, laugh
Che: Looking at those idols[35].
Lu: Actually, I spent less time this semester, (I) really look at those stuff every day, 10 hours a day I would say is one of those 'less' days.
Weni: True that, especially Shua Weibo, once you start you just can't stop…
Che: Yes! As long as you have started you just can't stop, you are just on there all the time.
Chong: It's really an addiction!
Yes! (Many people agreeing in the background, can't identify the exact person)

(Excerpts from CNFG5)

Similarly, the participants in group five also mentioned that they spent a very long time online, some of them even referred to this behaviour as an 'addiction' just to show how dependent they were on social media. Of course, 'addiction' could be a form of expression and not necessarily suggest a neuropsychological disorder. Nonetheless, all the evidence above indicates how heavily these Chinese students rely on the internet and social media and the internet in general. It might be worth considering the possible limitation of the focus group as a research instrument: that the participants' opinions may lean towards what the majority of the participants think (Acocella, 2012). For example, I noticed in group three how Yang followed the previous speaker Li, using a similar semantic pattern:

"platforms, QQ, WeChat, just use phone to go on the Internet, every day, frequency, "many times a day, just to communicate with other people…" (Li, CNFG3).
"platforms, QQ, WeChat, sometimes Douyin, how? Just chatting to other people, "frequency, many times a day, kill time, communicate" (Yang, CNFG3).

[34] Shua, Chinese slang: a verb, literal meaning: brush, usually to describe the browsing and scrolling on the social media apps/platform
[35] Korean pop (K-pop) stars, for K-pop fans they usually refer their favourite celebrities as idols

However, this is understandable as they might feel this is the 'correct' way to answer the questions by following the previous speaker. Moreover, participants from different groups all made similar comments on how frequently they use social media or the internet and this is a repeated pattern across the whole dataset that is worth identifying as a theme in itself: *'always online*'.

5.3.2.2 Doing almost 'everything' online

The participants not only spent long hours online almost every day but also seemed to be doing 'everything' online, from sending messages to family and friends to using apps to memorise English words to using WechatPay. These Chinese students were using different apps/platforms for various purposes ranging from communication, entertainment, education and even lifestyle.

One of the main uses for social media apps, however, remains communication. The two popular social media platforms WeChat and QQ, both run by Tencent and having similar instant messaging functions, were mentioned frequently by the participants. For example, Zhao in group three said that she uses WeChat for families while QQ was for university communications:

> *"WeChat is for talking to my parents, QQ is for (university) communications. Especially as a Banganbu[36] (Eng. Student officer) we use QQ to communicate even when we are having classes too, very frequent, because it's easier to send documents, easier to communicate, even if they're thousands of miles away"*.

Apart from communication, social media and the internet in general also provide an important source of entertainment for these students. They can be simply 'lurking' online by scrolling through endless social media feeds just to kill time. For instance, many participants in different groups mentioned that browsing and scrolling/Shua on social media platforms like Douyin and Weibo:

> *Yang: I sometimes browse and scroll/Shua Weibo, just looking at some funny stuff and food, sometimes watch some entertainment/celebrity news.*

[36] Banganbu is a generic term for students who have certain classroom duties, perhaps similar to Student officer in the UK. However, unlike in the UK where the student officer is usually elected by university students, the ones referred to here are usually in charge of a particular class. This could because in China, students are with the same classmates throughout their entire university programme.

Chu: Highlight: food! Every midnight, browsing the food till you are as hungry as hell hmm but have nothing to eat then go to sleep hehe (CNFG1)

As in the previous section, some participants said that they spent a lot of time doing these activities online:

"When I go on the internet, I usually use social media platforms like QQ, WeChat more (than other apps/platforms), sometimes I play some video games, listening to music, watching videos, basically at least seven to eight hours per day" (Xu, CNFG1)
"I almost spent six hours online, mainly use my phone to read my major related books, so I spent long hours on there, I usually use social media like QQ, WeChat and Weibo" (Hong, CNFG3).
"Well, I probably spend like eight hours a day on the internet, I normally use QQ, WeChat, what for? Mainly for going on the internet, chatting to other people, browsing Qzone, just to kill time" (Wang, CNFG3).

Additionally, participants listed a wide array of apps/platforms which they used for educational purposes. Those apps/platforms were usually to do with online course delivery or about English learning, especially the vocabulary. See one example below:

Yang: What softwares do you usually use for studying?
Quan: I use Zhidao, Xuexitong (app names), and…
Xu: (Asking Quan) just Shua online courses?
Quan; and also…what was it called? Mandarin Testing! (app name)
Yang: Then.. Do you guys use any software to memorise English words?
Lin: Baicizhan
Quan: Jinshanciba
Xu: Liulishuo
Yang: Anything else? I usually use CoCo English

(excerpts from CNFG1)

Of course, examples to do with learning were not limited to the one above. Also as one of the research questions regarding the use of social media for learning, this will be examined in detail in the next section.

Thus, participants used the internet and social media a lot: they were 'always online' and seemly doing 'everything' online; they also showed extensive knowledge of different apps/platforms that they can use for their different needs. Moreover, social media platforms nowadays tend to be multi-functional rather than serving a single purpose. For example, dominant apps like WeChat not only enable people to communicate with each other but has many additional functions such as WechatPay, or platforms designed for payment initially

nowadays also have messaging functions. The multi-functional aspect of technology itself may indirectly cause these students to use social media for almost everything, as Yang (CNFG1) told other participants with regards to the primarily payment app, Alipay:

> *Yang: so, you were implying that you use WeChat (mostly) for money transactions, QQ for getting some notifications. Then, have you guys tried using Alipay (for messaging people), you can chat to people on Alipay as well! (CNFG1)*

In addition to this, we can see from the all the quotes above that these participants seemed to not limit themselves in terms of social media by only mentioning apps like QQ or Wechat. Even Alipay was mentioned when talking about the different uses of social media apps/platforms. Therefore, it is worth exploring what these students consider as 'social media' and this is addressed in the next section.

5.3.2.3 "They are all social media!"—understandings towards social media

The pattern of responses across all focus groups was that these participants seemed to include a wide range of apps/platforms under the 'social media' category. This is especially evident at the beginning of the discussions when all group members were describing what social media platforms they normally used. Their answers ranged from apps /platforms that are usually seen as social networking sites (such as WeChat or QQ) to dating apps. For instance,

> *"About social media, the platforms (I) most used, apart from what he mentioned before like QQ, WeChat, in everyday life, I also like to use Weibo, then Facebook those stuff, posting some stuff about my life. Then, TanTan[37], yes, chuckles, I like to use TanTan, it's a platform to get to know new people. Hmm, this is what I think social media (is)…" (Gong, CNFG2).*

Some participants gave a very broad and rhetorical definition of social media, as in the example below:

> *"I think social media is to promote interpersonal communication' (Mei, CNFG2);*
> *'…I think social media is the bridge that connects people" (Li, CNFG3).*

Others seemed to be confused about what social media is. In the example below, Guo is unsure whether to include Microsoft Office as 'social media':

[37] a popular dating app in China, similar to Tinder

Da: Let me ask you a question, does your teacher use any social media during the class?
Guo: Office is not (counted as social media), isn't it?
Xiao: Have you not used any of them during IT class at least?
Guo: Office is not, isn't it?
Da: Office counts!
Ting: Apart from IT class uses PPT (PowerPoint), Excel and Word, other classes normally do not use (any social media).
(Excerpt from CNFG4)

After Guo repeated her question about whether Office counted as a social media platform, and Da responded, another group member proceeded to list other Microsoft software examples that were used during classroom teaching. This could be an example of opinions leaning towards the group's dominant voices. However, looking at the data as a whole, a wide array of platforms and broad definitions of social media were mentioned by different participants across the groups and also confusion expressed about what social media is, as well as what apps/platforms could be counted as social media.

Given references to various apps/platforms during the discussion, in the post-focus group interviews, the first question I asked was what they think social media is. Their responses were rather interesting, as illustrated from group one below:

Quan: Social media, socialising and media, social interactions, is interpersonal communications, is the extension of interpersonal relationships, Baidu[38] it yourself!
Xu: No wonder you are major in Chinese haha!
Chu: Social media is just social interactions…
Me(researcher): So, you think social media is for people to communicate with each other, can it be used for learning?
Chu: I think…no…
Quan: There's group chat for studying purposes, you can communicate and studying from each other within that group chat, in fact they are all tied up together.
Xu: Studying and working all tied up together.
Quan: hmm[39] /yes
Yang: Then what is 'social'? Is WeChat[40] only for money transactions?
Xu: For example when I asking you English questions when I don't understand…(inaudible the conversation was too heated many people were talking at the same time).

[38] Baidu is the biggest search engine in China, in this context it can be seen as 'Google it'
[39] hmm here is showing agreement
[40] Wechat is one of those multi-functional 'super apps' not only for messaging, it also has Wechat Pay function like PayPal. Especially in China nowadays most places are cashless even for mobile street vendors they would have QR code for you to scan and pay, people either use Wechat or Alipay for payment both online and offline).

Yang: Well, I have no words to say (chuckles). Then I think the rest are social media too. Social media is not just for socialising, I think…
Chu: What are they?
Yang: I think the ones I mentioned before they are all social media.
Xu: As long as people can talk on there, is counted as social media, right?
Lin: As long as you can access to information out there that count (as social media).
Yang: You can say that. for example, if I post an article on Baiduwenku[41] you can get a notification, it's actually a kind of communication, it does not have to be right now, me and you, does not have to communicate at the same time (synchronised), it can be different time (asynchronised), different space. Therefore, social media includes lots of aspects, all sorts of software, they all count.

(Excerpts from CNFG1)

Although some parts of the responses were unfortunately inaudible, the social media definition from these participants can be heard clearly. Towards the end, Yang gave a rather definite answer to what social media is, stating that all the apps/platforms he mentioned during this discussion are social media, further concluding that as long as it is a platform that enables people to communicate, to access information, not restricted to time or location, they can be seen as social media. That is to say, they tend to think of social media is a broad concept, not limited to particular apps/platforms.

Last but not least, it may worth point out that the participants might be seen as interchanging the topic from social media to phone use or internet use in general. Although the topic guide with example questions explicitly states 'social media', for example, 'can you talk about the benefits of using social media for learning', judging from the data shown in previous sections, they could be talking about the benefits of attending online courses, how convenient it is to do so and how helpful it is to their studies. I do not think this is because the participants misunderstood the question. I see this as evidence supporting the idea that these e participants embraced social media as a complex idea, not restricted to mainstream platforms such as Wechat (in the Chinese context) or Facebook or even what we traditionally do on social media.

It may therefore be a mistake to define social media based on the popularity of specific platforms. Firstly, the popularity of social media platforms varies from region to region, and some regions may not even use what is prevalent in another region at all. For example,

[41] a document sharing platform

mainland China does not have access to Facebook or Instagram and a majority of Chinese people do not use them or even have ever heard of them. Secondly, technologies develop fast and change constantly: what is popular today may not even exist a few years later. For example, a social media platform like Myspace which was once used as an example of a typical social media platform, is no longer that popular or well-known. Interestingly, this point is somehow echoed by some of the participants in group five:

> *Luo: any app I think it could become obsolete in time…*
> *Wen: but there's possibilities that come out better ones might come out (in the future), for example, the penetration rate of QQ was that high, but WeChat is up now so less people are using QQ now, right? (CNFG5)*

5.3.3 Role of social media in learning

5.3.3.1 Preparation for major exams and certifications

During the focus group discussions, a recurring theme emerged regarding the use of social media apps/platforms for exam preparation among the participants. This pattern was observed across different focus groups, indicating a common practice among the students. It is noteworthy to mention that earlier in the Context chapter (2.1.1), it was highlighted that university students in China often have to pass significant exams and certifications, particularly national-level assessments. Among these exams, English language proficiency tests such as CET4 and CET6 were highlighted as the most prevalent. These exams are very important for the students as they are essential for obtaining a university degree and serve as valuable qualifications when entering the job market. In the excerpt from group one below, Yang, the group leader asked other participants directly whether they used any software/apps for English vocabulary learning:

> *Yang: Then.. Do you guys use any apps/softwares to memorise vocabulary?*
> *Lin: Baicizhan.*
> *Quan: Jinshanciba.*
> *Xu: Liulishuo.*
> *Yang: Anything else? I usually use CoCo English.*
>
> *(Excerpts from CNFG1)*

Notice that Yang did not specify what vocabulary when he asked the question, but the participants all replied with English learning apps/platforms. This small detail indicates that it is almost a common sense that everyone needs to learn English vocabulary. In another

example, Guo (CNFG4) described in detail how she utilises the 'mini programme' function in WeChat to learn English:

> *Guo: Mainly…Now I use something called Jiguangdanci, that vocabulary learning software (under the mini-programme category) within WeChat. I would study 20-30 minutes every day, to be more specific, I would study three to five sets of words, also, this is the (typical) study load for one day, I daka (Eng. clock in) every day….'*
> *Da: Any other apps/softwares?*
> *Guo: And also, Yingyuqupeiyin, I listen to qupeiyin (short for Yingyuqupeiyin, app name) every day, (I) have to listen to it, usually five times, one short article I listen to it five times, listen to the same person (who recorded the English audio)"*
> *Da: and then practice by yourself?*
> *Guo: Hmm, yes yes.*
>
> *(Excerpts from CNFG4)*

Guo's description above indicates her dedication to English learning, as she set study goals and clocked in every day. Similar English learning examples can be found in other groups. One participant mentioned that she studied English on her phone, simply following the teacher's orders: '*then I use my phone to memorise (English) words, because it's the teacher's requirements, so you have to do it every day, you have to*…' (Lin, CNFG1). More importantly, these participants were probably facing immense pressure to pass those major English exams. As Yang in group two explained: *"I use social media to learn, mainly for memorising those (English) words, to pass the CET4 and CET6 exams."* Moreover, Ou (CNFG2) further emphasised the importance of passing CET4: "*…because in our university, you have to pass CET4, so we try to memorise more words every day..."* Considering the fact that China is not an English-speaking country and English is not widely used in the daily lives of many individuals, it is understandable that the participants in the focus groups were eager to find ways to improve their English skills through social media platforms, especially for passing exams like CET4 and 6.

In addition to English exams, the participants were also found to utilise various apps/platforms mainly on their phone, to prepare for other exams or certifications. For example, some people mentioned using apps to help them to practice Mandarin Chinese for passing Putonghua Shuiping Ceshi (PSC). Similar to English learning, many participants

practiced Mandarin[42] on their phone with Mandarin learning apps. For example, Ting (CNFG4) described how she used these apps to practice Mandarin:

> *Ting: When it's late at night, everything is tranquil…hehe… (she laughed too much and had to pause).*
> *Yang: Give you 30 seconds, tighten up, stop laughing!*
> *Ting: I open Putonghuaceshi (on my phone), practice my Mandarin (laugh).*
> *(Excerpts from CNFG4)*

Participants in this group were friends so their conversations were often quite casual and playful. In this instance, Ting was laughing so hard, the group leader Da cut her off and started to mock her by describing how Ting practiced Mandarin on her phone*:*

> *Da: Ok, I will speak for this person over here (means Ting). Every evening when everything is quiet and peaceful[43] I always want to open Putonghuaceshi to practice out loud, do the mock test, to see if I get to the 'Erjia' level (a desired level), if not, I feel defeated. If I do, I will be super excited. Over (Everyone laughs).*

It is interesting to see how she described her roommate Ting practising Mandarin late at night. Although PSC is as significant as English exams, to some it is still of great importance.

Participants' responses during the post-discussion interview further confirmed the reasons why they use social media apps/platforms for learning these exam-related subjects. For example, I asked participants in group four why everyone seemed to be practising languages especially English on their phone. Their responses are cited below:

> *Participants (many people together, cannot identify who): because English is difficult! Because we have English classes!*
> *Me: Then why didn't you use it to study other courses? For example, Chinese? (noted that most of the participants in this group major in Chinese)*
> *Participants: We do not need to study Chinese, we are masters! Laugh, then it's a discussion about their majors, inaudible…*
> *Female voice: Study Mandarin! Because we need to pass the test…*
> *Another female voice cut off previous speaker: mainly for looking up (English) words. Because for studying Chinese, when you reading a novel you are studying Chinese, then when you watching news you are studying Chinese too, maybe studying Chinese…(inaudible group's voices)…so you are studying it without you even realising it…*

[42] There are other dialects/languages (e.g., Cantonese, Shanghainese) spoken by Chinese people from different regions and some people may have difficulty speaking standard Mandarin.
[43] She was suggesting Ting was being annoying to disturb other people's night sleep since these two are roommates.

Another female voice: didn't intent to (study).
Another female voice: it's just because there are so many English learning apps out there, many English learning softwires, dictionary, listening, videos, vocabulary and stuff like that…

(Excerpt from CNFG4)

The focus group discussions revealed that the learning practices mentioned, such as memorising English words and practicing Mandarin, were primarily driven by the participants' need to excel in exams. English language proficiency exams, in particular CET4 and CET6, were highlighted as being of significant importance for obtaining a university degree and enhancing future job prospects. The difficulty of studying English compared to other subjects, further emphasized the necessity for students to dedicate more time to English language learning. As a result, their social media usage appeared to be influenced by the need to succeed in these exams. While language tests were frequently mentioned, other assessments or certifications related to specific fields such as teaching or law, were discussed less frequently, as their relevance depended on individual course requirements or career aspirations.

It is evident that social media plays a significant role in the preparation for major exams and qualifications. While many of these apps and platforms are primarily designed for learning purposes, they are often embedded within traditional social networking sites or incorporate social media elements. For example, there are English learning mini programmes within WeChat and teaching qualification exam apps that include bullet commenting functions. The inclusion of social features in these dedicated learning apps/platforms may explain why these students perceive them as social media. Meanwhile, the pressure to succeed in exams and obtain specific certifications contribute to the importance placed on utilising these platforms for learning purposes.

5.3.3.2 Supplements and supports to university teaching and learning

Apart from learning revolving around major exams or qualifications tied with their degree or career development, these students also utilised digital platforms to help their university studies. This included online courses that were directly related to their university degree; looking up information and resources online when they encountered problems; communication between teachers and classmates on social media.

The online courses they attended could be mandatory or voluntary. The most frequently mentioned examples, however, were that they had to use an app called 'Zhidao' to 'Shua'/attend online courses. Since it was mandatory, many participants had negative attitudes towards it. For example, Lo in group two mentioned that "…*that app called 'Zhidao', our university forces us to 'Shua' online courses on there every day to get credits! If we did not get enough credits, we cannot graduate!*". It seemed if it wasn't for the sake of his degree, he would not use Zhidao for online courses at all. Since this app was mentioned frequently, I asked the participants to elaborate on this 'Zhidao' app in the post-discussion interview:

> *Researcher: ...you guys mentioned about attending online courses on Zhidao, can you tell me more about it? Like do you have to purchase those online courses yourself, or are they provided by your university?*
> *Yang: (We attend) Online courses, just because the teachers want to save resources, those courses should have taught in our university, but they made them online.*
> *Researcher: Are those courses recorded by your teacher? They record their teaching…?*
> *Quan: No, it's (because) our teachers are not good enough, so they let us watch how other teachers from other university teach…*
> *Yang: No!*
> *The researcher: Then where do those (good) teachers come from?*
> *Unidentifiable/ too many voices at the same time: from all those famous universities!*

As can be seen above, participants gave some rather honest opinions on what they think of the online courses on Zhidao. It is not clear that why this university asked its students to use Zhidao to attend online courses delivered by external teachers. It might be to do with a shortage of internal teaching staff or trying to expand teaching and learning resources by getting external materials. Nevertheless, the power relations between these participants and their university is clear: even though some of them do not like using Zhidao for online courses, they still have to do it, otherwise they could potentially fail their degree. However, this does not mean that all participants dislike the idea of online courses. On the contrary, these students voluntarily attended other online courses, despite the cost:

> *Cai Yeah, just the online courses, C-language*[44]
> *Yang: hmm what do you think?*
> *Cai: I think that teacher is not very good, not so much 'nutrition'.*
> *Chu cut off Cai: So badly designed and so boring!*
> *Cai: So boring and selling it for 398 yuan*[45] *so expensive!*

[44] *C -language is a general-purpose, procedural computer programming language.*
[45] Chinese currency

Bing: That much money?!
Xu:(you are) so rich!
Cai: Me and my classmate we bought it together so half…
Bing: Did you get scammed?
Yang: I think online courses are actually very good!
Lin: Moocs offers a lot of language courses for free!
Yang: See! Exactly!
Chu: There are QQ group chats you can add
Cai: And some Photoshop courses

These students also actively sought out additional resources to supplement to their university teaching and learning. However, this usually occurred when they were not satisfied with their own teachers. See the following excerpts from group one below:

Yang: Yes, I think it is very convenient. It is so much more convenient than attending classes. I feel like that my teacher is basically chatting nonsense every time in class. Like when I was in the class, my teacher talks about the United States, talking about the UK, bragging about how he studied abroad before, how outstanding he was (laugh). His teaching has no structure, no focus on the exam. However, if you study online, the online courses usually more focused, and they will summarise the important knowledge points. Sometimes they even give us a summary for us to print it out, which is even better.

Chu: The most important part is highlighting the important points[46]. Basically, nobody listens to our teacher when he/she[47] teaches, we just hope he/she can point out the important points before exams then hooray! He/she can start from one word then going off topic so much! Cannot even pull him back on track! Then that time we literally spent half of the class listening to him read aloud from the textbook word by word. It's totally useless! Listening to him reciting is just the same as we read the books ourselves!

Yang: He/she just wanted to make it to 45 minutes[48], otherwise he/she cannot last 45 minutes at all.

Chu: Our math class. We were supposed to have three sessions altogether, but the teacher let us leave early at the end of second session. He/she said he/she already finished everything he/she wanted to cover, nothing else to teach, he just read those slides, then it's done.

(Excerpts from CNFG1)

[46] these are usually knowledge points that are very likely to be asked in the exams thus the students usually keen on if the teacher have outlined the important points for them
[47] In Mandarin, he/she pronouns have the same pronunciation thus impossible to identify the gender here.
[48] one class/lesson usually lasts 45 minutes in China

The conversation above contains some strong criticisms of the teaching some participants received. These dissatisfactions meant that preferred watching the online courses than listening to their teachers:

> "*I think the online courses about my major (English) are pretty good, a lot of my classmates bought TEM4 and TEM8 courses, from what I have seen their online courses seemed pretty good. They were listening to those courses during the class, they were watching it during the class too!" (Yang, CNFG1).*

Although the students were expected to be focused during the class, some of Yang's classmates chose to ignore their teacher and watch their own online resources instead. Considering the Chinese culture of respecting the authorities and the teacher being seen as the authority of the classroom, this behaviour can be seen quite disrespectful and therefore, surprising. However, at the same time, this reflects that the students were able to utilise social media apps/platforms to substitute the "low quality" teaching of their teachers with the "high quality" teaching they found online. Similar comments can be found in other groups too. For example, participants in group five also expressed that they taught themselves online instead of listening to his teachers:

> *Luo: I watched all the videos about it, at least to see what's included (in the courses). After all that, I did not pay attention to the teachers when I was having the class.*
> *Che: Don't even start, my module, Mathematical modelling I don't even listen to the teacher at all, I learn everything on there(online)'*
>
> *(Excerpt from group five)*

Apart from acting as an alternative way to get education, especially when the students are unhappy with their own teachers' teaching, social media apps/platforms can also be helpful when they encounter any difficulties. For instance, Yang in group one praised social media, explaining that:

> *"see if you don't have those software, apps, you have to ask the teacher everything (the stuff you don't understand), you have to run to the teachers' office ask the teacher questions after the class, but when you have social media, a lot of times you would get the answers if you just look them up by yourself. "*

By using social media apps/platforms, these students can look for answers and seek additional resources on their own. It might also be worth considering that the Chinese classroom culture

is that students quietly listen to the teachers so it can be seen as rude to interrupt the teacher by asking questions. In this sense, aocial media platforms provide alternative ways to address questions the students might have. Also, during the class, social media apps/platforms were used as a tool by the teachers to support teaching activities such as checking attendance and allocating assignments. For example:

> *Chong: I remember there was a 'little classroom assistant' app, the teacher of C language would assign questions on it.*
> *Wen: Will there be problems with the layout?*
> *Chong: Yes, as long as you open it, it's like a small programme.*

This section shows that social media plays a supplementary role in the learning and teaching experiences of these students. It serves to compensate for what they perceive as lacking or of limited value in traditional classroom teaching. Social media platforms provide support when students encounter difficulties in their studies by providing alternative learning and teaching resources.

5.3.3.3 Social media is a place for interest-led learning

Other than learning related to their university degree, social media is also a good place for learning anything that the participants are interested in, which is not necessarily related to their university degree. For example, Che pointed out that many girls would go on social media to learn about beauty and makeup:

> *"You don't know that many girls are handicapped[49], and many people who wear makeup will go to Weibo to watch beauty bloggers, learn makeup, and outfits.' (Che, CNGF5)*

Similarly, Xiao (CNFG4) said that

> "*For example, on Xiaohongshu[50], you can learn about how to style your outfits, manicure and make-up, and hair*."

This is relevant not just for beauty tips but other hobbies as well:

> *"And then there's for your own hobbies and interests. For example, I love calligraphy, so I use Boyashufa[51], and those electronic manuscripts you can practice online" (Gan, CNFG3).*
> *"Anyways I think (for learning that happened) outside of the classroom is better. You can learn what you want to learn, some extra stuff like piano, cooking...you can learn*

[49] Chinese slang, is an exaggerated term in here to describe you can't do (makeup) properly.
[50] Red (Eng), app name
[51] App name

anything! I was alone at home during the winter holidays, so I just learnt how to cook, I just taught myself..." (Yang, CNFG1).

The above examples not only evidence how the learning on social media can be led by their own interest and hobbies, but also shows that these participants knew where to find the information they needed on social media apps/platforms. The examples listed above (such as going on Xiaohongshu for makeup tutorials) seem very different from previous sections where participants listed examples of using social media to learn English, attending structured online courses etc. Not only is this usage based on personal interests, it also seems less 'visible' as the participants may or may not have a clear agenda for such learning. He or she could just go on the app and scroll through the feed to see what has been posted. Whether such practices are considered as 'learning' seems to be strongly linked to an individual's own understandings. Unlike other participants who had no doubts about including apps like Xiaohongshu for makeup and outfit ideas as learning, others like Lo struggle to recall learning experiences on social media:

> *"In terms of social media, normally I use QQ and WeChat for talking to other people, mainly for chatting yeah, then just looking at those meaningless feeds, looking at those people who apparently have too much free time who post random shit online. Secondly...are those short video apps like Douyin, or like Huoshanxiaoshipin[52]. Thirdly are.. hmm… some related to study for example, Zhihu. I think there are a lot of Big Gods[53], the stuff they talk about, hmm, is very eye-opening..."*
>
> *(Excerpts from CNFG2)*

Lo took some time to identify and of his social media activity as learning related. He did finally identify that the 'eye-opening' information on Zhihu could potentially relate to learning.

5.3.4 Factors impacting Chinese university students' use of social media for learning

5.3.4.1 Internal factors: students' perceptions of and knowledge about social media for learning

The factors impacting the university students in the Chinese study can be categorised as internal and external. Internal factors include their perceptions of the advantages and

[52] App name, short video based platform

[53] literal translation here, this term refers to those very popular influencers, verified social media accounts etc. On Zhihu as it is a Q&A based platform, the people who were invited to answer those questions are usually the experts in their field. Netizens calls them Big Gods to show respect. But some Big Gods are also accused of faking their qualifications such as educational backgrounds, just to impress people.

disadvantages of using social media for learning as well as their understanding of learning on social media.

Many participants addressed the benefits and challenges during the focus groups directly and indirectly. In fact, these perceived benefits and challenges affected the extent to which they would use social media for learning purposes. For instance, some people praised the abundance of information and resources that social media apps/platforms have to offer. This was especially valued when looking for additional learning resources outside the classroom; as one participant stated, *"... the content is richer on social media" (Gon, CNFG2)*. More examples of comments on how abundant the information is on social media can be found below:

> *"Only (the stuff) you can't think of it, nothing you can't find" (Cai, CNFG1)*
> *"…loads of stuff on there, loads of subjects you can study from…" (Luo, CNFG2)*
> *"...because social media is like...you started with a tiny dot then you found a whole sphere, using social media to study is like by using that tiny weeny platform found that numerous resources on there…" (Gan, CNFG3)*

The above comments show that although the participants did not state explicitly that presence of numerous resources on social media was the reason why they used it, this benefit was certainly a significant factor affecting their usage.

The use of various social media apps/platforms allowed some participants to break free from the constraints of time and space. They appreciated the flexibility of being able to learn whenever and whatever they desired. The convenience afforded by social media emerges as another frequently mentioned benefit of using it for learning. These findings align with the responses obtained from the open-ended questions, reinforcing the notion that social media offers convenience and flexibility in the learning process:

> *"I think in terms of using social media for studying…it has great benefits. First, the social media itself covers a wide range of information, it's not like you have to find it book by book, it's super convenient, as long as you want to know it's just one click away; Secondly is anytime, anywhere. For example, if you download an educational app, as long as you got a phone, no matter where you are, even when you go to the toilet you can memorise two English words…" (Lo, CNFG2).*

Lo praised the amount of information available on social media which has brought her great convenience compared with traditional methods such as finding useful information in books.

Moreover, this convenience is also reflected in the observation that he can learn 'anytime, anywhere' thanks to these apps, even if it is a few minutes in the bathroom. These small amounts of spare time as Lo in this group later referred to as 'fragmented time' is what she thinks social media apps/platforms are especially good for.

However, the use of social media for learning is not without its challenges. Many participants from different focus groups highlighted that social media platforms can be significant distractions. Several individuals expressed the need for strong self-discipline when using social media for learning, as it can easily lead to detrimental effects on their studies. They provided examples of instances where they had attempted to study on social media but ended up being distracted by notifications or other irrelevant information. These accounts demonstrate the potential pitfalls and the importance of managing distractions while using social media as a learning tool. See some examples below:

> *"The challenges are… Get distracted easily. For example, when you are studying, when you're using some sort of software studying, it's super annoying that a chat window or ads pops out all of a sudden. Secondly is the phone itself, personally, I use my phone for fun more (than studying), if I just use my phone to study, I cannot be concentrated 100%... It cannot be compared to sitting in the library with books in front of you, it does not have that effect…" (Luo, CNFG2).*
> *"I think, when using your phone to study, if you can (study) without the mobile data, offline mode I think it's quite good, but if you turn your data on, whenever there's a new message come in you just want to click on it so much…"(Wen, CNFG5).*

What is more, a short conversation in group one further explained how easily they could be distracted, even though they started with specific learning goals:

> *Yang: …The difficulty is being constantly disturbed.*
> *Xu: I just can't control my hands*
> *Chu: I just can't control it haha, oh my, this (assignment) question is so boring, I'd better chat on QQ, okay, okay, haha, okay, it's been half an hour after chatting on QQ, which topic was I searching again? Forgot, haha!*
> *Yang: Then why didn't you say that when you went to Baidu to search for assignment questions, you suddenly saw a celebrity news, Yang Mi[54] just got divorced! and then started to read it.*
>
> *(Excerpts from CNFG1)*

[54] A famous Chinese actress

To fight against distraction, some people said that they would turn their phones to 'do not disturb' mode to minimise social media's distractions: "*I usually turn on do not disturb mode when I am studying so that there are no pop-ups" (Lu, CNFG5).* Moreover, some participants even deleted some social media apps to better concentrate on studies. For instance, Luo in group five mentioned that he deleted the app Tencent video to avoid being distracted when studying on XuexiQiangguo[55] on the phone.

> *"In order to cut out all distractions, I deleted the Tencent video, because I like to watch basketball on it. Usually, the first thing I do when I open my phone is to watch the basketball on it. In order to force myself not to watch it, I Just deleted it" (Luo, CNFG5).*

Apart from distraction, a few participants also had concerns about the quality of the information online. Although there are a lot of information and resources online, some mentioned that it is hard to identify which ones are right and which ones are false. For instance:

> *"In addition, if you search by yourself, you are not sure whether it is right or not. Although there are many resources, you cannot judge its correctness" (Chu, CNFG1).*

The lack of trust in the information online might also hinder their use of social media. Just one participant stated that he would trust the books rather than the content he found online:

> *"Knowledge about my major/degree you still need to read on paper, the books are always more reliable (than social media)" (Unrecognised male voice, CNFG5).*

5.3.4.2 External factors

The focus groups also revealed some external issues that impacted their use or non-use of social media for learning. Firstly, using social media and other digital technologies seemed impossible under the 'phone banning' policy. According to the participants, this is a university-wide policy that means no phone use is allowed in the classroom. Indeed, they were asked to hand in their phone before the class began. In some cases, they were allowed to keep one or two phones for the students who sit at the front taking pictures. During the post-focus group interviews, I asked more questions relating to the phone banning policy and learnt that this policy is strictly enforced to the first-year students but less strict for other year groups. The existence of such a policy was also confirmed when visiting the classrooms where the focus

[55] app name, designed to teach Chinese Communist Party's political values such as Xi Jinping thoughts

groups were held in front of the classroom, there was a pouch where students were expected to place their phones. When the participants were discussing the topic of using their phone in class, some participants expressed their frustration of not being able to use their phones at all: "*all of our phones got taken away what are you going to use?!" (many participants said at the same time, CNFG1*). Although the phone-banning policy is said to help the students concentrate during the class, it seems the students do not appreciate it. However, the actual implementation of this policy was largely dependent on their teachers:

> *"(when we were attending) some modules (we) need (to use) the phone, have to mark our attendance (on the app), so it will not be taken away, like (when we're) in computing class we don't need to hand in (our phones)" (Chong,CNFG5);*
> *"not all of our teachers take the phone away, the classmates sitting in the front are allowed to leave one or two phones for taking pictures of the PowerPoints" (Lu, CNFG5).*

Moreover, there are teachers who are actually against this phone-banning policy:

> "*last time we were about to hand in our phones, xxx teacher said we are in a digital era, without phone where you can get information? Do you know this word? No? Search it right now! And he/she scolded us; from then on, we never hand in our phone in xxx teacher's class, so I think we can actually make use of social media in the classroom, and it's extremely useful! "(Lo, CNFG2).*

Thus, this teacher's behaviour affected little Lo's opinion about whether phone is useful during the class. Whilst teachers can choose to ban social media use in the classroom, they can also encourage their students to use social media for learning. This is confirmed by Lin who mentioned that it is important for her to 'Daka' every day because it is the teacher's request:

> "*I use QQ, WeChat, then I also use my phone to memorise English words 'Daka' daily, because our teacher asked us to do it every day, it's a must, you have to do it…"(Lin,CNFG1)*.

Although different teachers have different views on the policy and teachers' requirements vary, it is safe to say that external factors like the school's policy and teacher's actions heavily influence how these students view social media use for learning.

In addition, other external factors affect their use of social media for learning. This is usually to do with practical issues such as access, fees and charges. For example, one participant mentioned that he/she uses certain platforms because others are blocked: *"yeah because*

(we) cannot climb over the wall (the great firewall) so we have to use Bilibli" (Lu, CNFG5) The money issue is also a concern for these students on choosing whether or not use certain platforms, with participants understandably preferring less costly apps/platforms or even free ones.

Lastly, the participants seemed to also be influenced by how their peers used social media. For example, sharing links of their study achievements on certain apps/platforms to their personal social media accounts such as WeChat was a common practice. At the end of the focus group, I asked participants how they knew so many educational apps/platforms group, I cite their responses below:

> *Researcher: where did you find those software/apps? Is it because your classmates and friends are using them?*
> *Unidentified voice: yes, some are recommended by our English teachers and also classmates' recommendations…*
> *Xuan: Also because other classmates' recommended…*
> *Someone: Yes*
> *Xuan: And the Daka/clock-in links (posted) on Wechat*
> *Many voices cut off Xuan: so many people Daka. Just look at them Daka every day, every day Daka!...*
> *Another voice: Then you ask what is this (app)? I will download one too! Another voice: Yes, so I will download it too, cause seeing them used makes me want to use it too, so you ask them…*
> *Da: Sometimes you don't even have to ask, just follow the link they post like "It is my XX day Daka on Jiguandanci"; "how many days I have Daka on Baicizhan"; "How many days I've had Jinshanciba"; sometimes you don't have to ask, the link they post can lead to downloading it or the names show.*
>
> *(excerpts from group four)*

5.3.5 Key focus group findings

The focus groups generated some interesting findings. Firstly, how these students used social media in their daily lives was portrayed as "always online" and "doing almost 'everything' online" which emphasises their dependency on and frequent use of the internet and social media. Moreover, it was found that the participants embraced a broad definition of "social media" in that a range of apps/platforms/websites were considered as social media.

Secondly, the role of social media in learning was multifaceted. It was used for exam preparation and obtaining qualifications, as well as complementing and supporting their university education. Additionally, participants utilised social media for learning based on

their own personal interests and hobbies, demonstrating its flexibility and relevance to their individual learning needs.

Thirdly, the participants discussed both the benefits and challenges of using social media for learning. These perceived advantages and difficulties influenced their decisions around when and how to use social media for educational purposes. External factors, such as phone banning policies implemented by educational institutions, were identified as barriers that limited the participants' access to social media within the classroom.

Overall, these findings shed light on the complex relationship between social media and learning, highlighting the participants' reliance on these platforms, the diverse purposes for which they are utilised, and the impact of perceived benefits and challenges on their engagement with social media for educational purposes.

5.4 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the findings and analysis based on the data collected from the participants in China. It started by outlining the questionnaire results accompanied with graphs and tables where possible; this was followed by a discussion of the broad categories identified in the qualitative data of the questionnaire. A detailed description of the focus group findings was presented thematically.

Since the research questions require both quantitative and qualitative answers, the results are summarised and briefly discussed here in relation to the RQs. A more comprehensive and extensive analysis, integrating data from both research sites and incorporating relevant literature, can be found in Chapter 7.

5.4.1 RQ1-How do university students in China use social media in the network society?

The questionnaire and focus group data provide a snapshot of how Chinese university students use social media within the broader context of the network society. The Chinese sample was composed mainly of first-year undergraduates in their late teens to early twenties, with a slight female majority and diverse academic disciplinary backgrounds. Students reported high levels of internet access and digital device ownership, creating the foundations for near-universal social media use. As the data suggested 98% of questionnaire

respondents reported daily use of social media, indicating that such practices were part of their daily routines. Focus group discussions further reinforced this pattern, with students describing themselves as “always online” and using social media for “almost everything.”

In addition to frequency of use, the way these Chinese students defined social media was revealing. In the beginning of the thesis, a working definition was given in section 1.2 (p13) and in section 3.4.1 I extensively discussed the conceptualisation of social media. Whilst not all students give an explicit answer towards the definition of social media during the focus group discussion, their answers show they embraced a broad definition social media, hence a common theme was emerged from the findings that “they are all social media”--while platforms such as WeChat and Weibo were mentioned, participants also considered search engines (e.g., Baidu) or online learning sites as social media. Just like Yang mentioned as long as it is a platform that enables people to communicate, to access information and it is not restricted by time or location, it can be seen as social media. This broadened definition reflects the increasingly blurred boundaries between communication, information, and learning platforms in China. Such flexibility resonates with Castells’ (2010) concept of the network society, where technological infrastructures interconnect diverse aspects of life. This finding also resonates Wellman (2001) notion of networked individualism, in which young people construct personalised networks from a wide range of tools. Consequently, Chinese students’ definitions of social media are shaped less by fixed categories and more by their own uses and preferences.

Students were also found to be “doing almost everything online” (see sec.5.3.2.2). This finding indicated the centrality of digital technologies in their daily lives. Social media platforms were not confined to socialising but were integrated into a wide spectrum of everyday activities. Participants reported using them for maintaining communication with peers and family, managing practical tasks such as online payments (i.e. WeChat pay) and shopping, and conducting searches related to their study subjects. In this sense, social media served as a multifunctional infrastructure that supported academic, social, and personal needs at the same time. Such wide-ranging social media practices illustrate how, within the network society (Castells, 2010), the lines separating everyday communication, financial transactions, and education are becoming fluid as digital technology integrate these domains.

Perceptions of social media use were complex. On the one hand, students valued its convenience, accessibility, and abundance of resources. Social media was seen as a tool to complement classroom instruction and extend learning beyond the university. On the other hand, concerns were raised about distraction, addiction, and the restrictions imposed by institutional policies such as phone bans in class. These tensions highlight an important power dynamic: while students increasingly curate their own digital learning spaces, institutions continue to impose controls, reflecting evolving teacher–student relations.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Chinese students' social media practices are not only widespread but also strategic and situated. They reflect a negotiation between agency and constraint, empowerment and distraction, individualised learning and institutional regulation. Moreover, they value the importance of cultural context: while critical thinking and open debate may be less prominent in Chinese educational traditions (Hofstede, 2011; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015), social media provides new spaces for experimentation, identity performance, and critical engagement. Post-pandemic evidence further suggests that these practices have not diminished; rather, they have been consolidated into hybrid forms of learning that combine institutional provision with student-driven digital networks (Walker, Jenkins, & Voce, 2023; Syska & Pritchard, 2023).

In summary, Chinese university students inhabit digital environments where social media plays multiple roles: facilitating communication, supporting coursework, enabling self-directed exploration, and reshaping Chinese HE hierarchies. Within the network society, these practices illustrate how young people construct learning activities on social media are flexible, cross-platform, and deeply integrated into their daily life. At the same time, the findings suggest both opportunities and challenges that shape the ongoing role of social media in Chinese higher education.

5.4.2 RQ2- What role does social media play in shaping and navigating learning networks for university students in China across formal, non-formal, and informal learning?

The findings from both the questionnaire and focus groups have highlighted the multifaceted role of social media in learning among Chinese university students. Firstly, social media platforms were found to play a significant role in preparing students for major exams and qualifications, such as the CET4 English exam or teaching certifications. This was evident

through examples of English learning mentioned in both the qualitative data from the questionnaire and the focus group discussions. It also aligns with recent research showing that Chinese students often integrate social media into structured academic goals, particularly language learning and test preparation (Huang, Li, & Liu, 2023). From a theoretical perspective, this pattern reflects the network society (Castells, 2010), in which digital infrastructures extend the reach of institutional assessment cultures, and connectivism (Siemens, 2005), where learners harness networks of information to meet formal learning objectives.

Furthermore, social media served as a valuable support or supplement to the students' learning experiences. It provided additional resources and opportunities for learning, such as online courses or materials related to personal interests that may not directly align with their degree programmes. These students reported using social media apps/platforms to enhance their learning outcomes in various areas. The qualitative data from the questionnaire responses and focus group excerpts provide evidence of how social media facilitated interest-based learning for these students. These practices illustrate how social media enables students to blur the boundaries between formal, non-formal, and informal learning (UNESCO, 2009). For instance, students' informal English learning on apps like Baicizhan was influenced by formal learning requirements. This suggests these students construct flexible, hybrid learning networks which also resonates with the concept of networked individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), as students design their own networks of knowledge and resources based on individual goals and preferences.

Additionally, the focus groups provided valuable insights and clarification to some of the confusions or unanswered questions that emerged from the qualitative data of the questionnaire. This echoed with the rationale for applying MMR for this study for completeness as discussed in the Methodology chapter. For example, many respondents mentioned studying English as an example of using social media for learning in their responses to the open-ended question. However, the specific reasons behind their English learning were not initially clear. During the focus groups, it was discovered that these students were preparing for English exams. This information provided a better understanding of their motivation to learn English and the context in which they were using social media for language learning. Furthermore, the focus groups explored deeper into their English learning practices,

such as daily engagement with English learning apps. These discussions added depth and nuance to the preliminary findings from the questionnaire's open-ended question.

While students emphasised the benefits of social media for learning—such as convenience, resource diversity, and flexibility—they also recognised potential drawbacks, including social media possess as a huge distraction to them and its overuse is harmful for eye health. These ambivalent perceptions are consistent with recent findings that digital informal learning can both enhance and undermine academic outcomes depending on how it is integrated into students' routines (Mehrvarz et al., 2021). This tension between independence and diversion highlights a central dilemma of the network society: learners must sift through overwhelming amount of online content while simultaneously managing conflicting attentional pressures. Moreover, institutional restrictions, such as phone bans, further complicated this negotiation, highlighting the tension between student-led learning practices and university control. Students' individual choices on what and how to learn with social media are influenced by these practical conditions.

In summary, Chinese students' use of social media for learning illustrates both opportunities and contradictions. On one hand, they were found utilise various social media platforms to extend and personalise their learning, consistent with theories of connectivism and networked individualism. On the other, their practices remain strongly shaped by the educational, socio-cultural and practical restrictions. This duality highlights the need for critical reflection on how social media transforms but also subjects to traditional hierarchies and educational norms in Chinese higher education.

5.4.3 RQ3- What are the factors that impact Chinese university students' use of social media for learning?

The findings from the questionnaire indicate that Chinese students generally hold a positive attitude towards using social media for learning, despite acknowledging that it can be a distraction to their studies. The perceived benefits and challenges identified in the open-ended questionnaire responses were also echoed to some extent in the focus group discussions, although the difficulty of finding the right information, which was highlighted in the questionnaire, was not as prominent in the focus groups.

The convenience of using social media for learning was emphasised by the participants in both the questionnaire and focus groups. They expressed that social media platforms provide numerous online resources, making it easier and more efficient to find information compared to traditional methods such as using books. This convenience factor was seen as a significant advantage.

The focus groups shed light on additional external factors that influenced the participants' use of social media for learning. For example, the "phone banning" policy was explored in detail during the focus groups, providing insights into how this policy impacted the students' access to and use of social media for learning.

Overall, the questionnaire and focus group data together revealed the participants' positive attitudes towards using social media for learning, highlighting the convenience and abundant resources provided by social media platforms. These perceived benefits of using social media platforms are likely to encourage their use of social media for learning. On the other hand, external challenges such as “school policy” financial concerns” and internal negative perceptions of social media use (addition, distraction) are most likely to discourage their use of social media for learning.

Chapter 6. Results and analysis: UK

6.1 Introduction of this chapter

This chapter focuses on presenting and analysing the data collected from the participants in the UK. Similar to the previous chapter, it summarises the quantitative results of the questionnaire first, then it addresses the qualitative data collected from the open-ended questions of the questionnaire and focus groups. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the UK data which combines quantitative and qualitative findings together in relation to the research questions.

6.2 Questionnaire results

6.2.1 Overview of the English questionnaire responses received

A total of 99 responses were received for the English questionnaire after using a combination of sampling methods as discussed in the methodology. However, two responses were excluded from this analysis as the respondents were not undergraduate students. Therefore, the total number of valid responses for this analysis was 97 (*N=97*). As with Chapter 5, this section of quantitative results is organised into several themes: demographical information, general user habits and digital environment, and social media and learning.

The two open-ended questions in the English questionnaire received 78 and 76 responses respectively (*N=97*) which in total contained 3144 English words. Thus, around 80% of the respondents left written answers averaging 20 English words per response. However, as with the Chinese data, the responses collected here might still be seen as relatively brief and sometimes unclear. Therefore, as mentioned in Chapter 5, the qualitative data collected from the open-ended questions also uses categories rather than themes.

Before the results are presented, it should be noted that some small changes were applied to the UK questionnaire in order to be relevant to this UK institution. To be more specific, the options of the respondents' field of study were changed in order to reflect this institution's division into schools of study and are therefore different from the Chinese version. In addition to this, one question was added to the English questionnaire asking whether respondents were home (UK), European Union (EU), or international students. However, this question was left out of this analysis as it is not relevant in terms of the focus of this study.

6.2.2 Demographical information

The demographical information of the English questionnaire respondents (UK respondents) contained results of their age, gender, field of study and year of study.

Table 6.1 shows the gender distribution of the respondents in the UK and reveals that slightly more than 70% of the total respondents identified themselves as female. It is important to note that the sampling methods employed in this study do not allow for generalisation of these findings to the gender ratio of the entire university. Additionally, the English version of the questionnaire included specific options for “non-binary” and “prefer not to say” instead of a generic “other” option, which was used in the Chinese questionnaire.

Table 6.1 Frequency table showing the genders of English questionnaire respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage %
Female	69	71.1
Male	25	25.8
Non-binary	2	2.1
Prefer not to say	1	1.0
Total	97	100.0

Tables 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4 collectively present the frequency distribution regarding the age groups and year of study of the respondents in the English questionnaire. Table 6.2 indicates that over 50% of the participants fell within the age range of 18 to 20 years old. Moving on to Table 6.3, we can see that nearly half of the respondents were first-year students. Finally, Table 6.4 cross-references the age and year of study of the participants, revealing that three mature students (over the age of 26) who were in their first year also completed the questionnaire.

Table 6.2 Frequencies and percentages of different age groups of English questionnaire respondents

Age group	Frequency	Percentage %
Under 18	2	2.1
18-20	54	55.7
21-23	34	35.1
24-26	3	3.1
Over 26	4	4.1
Total	97	100.0

Table 6.3 Frequencies and percentages of different year of study of English questionnaire respondents

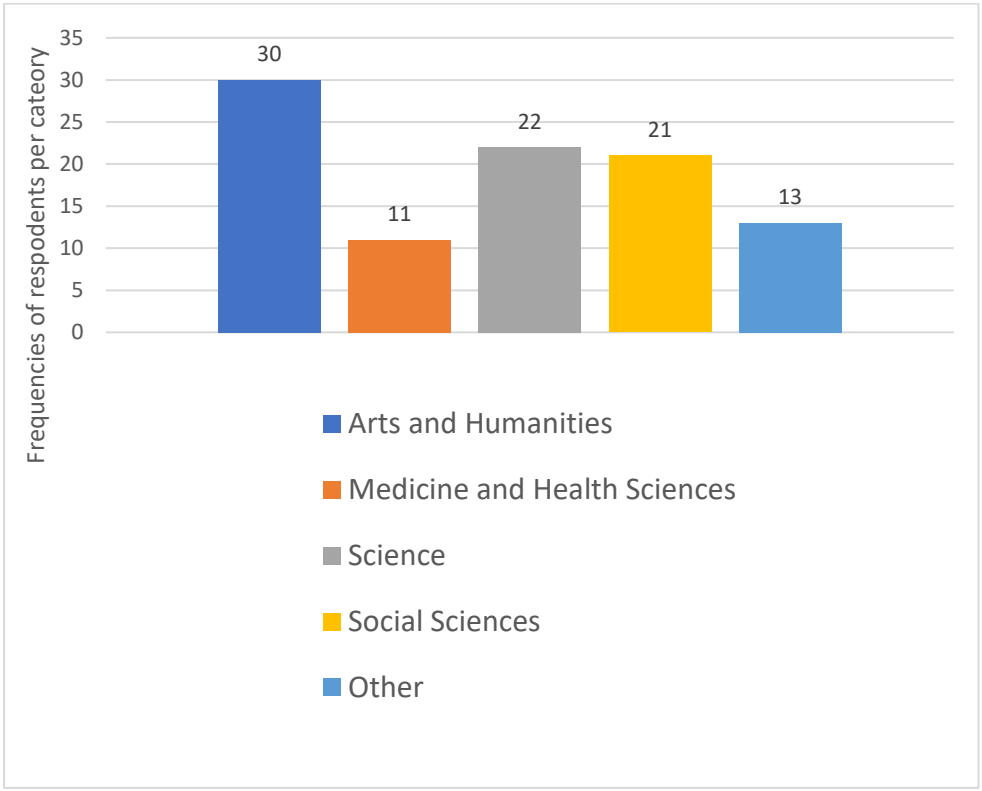
Year of Study	Frequency	Percentage
Foundation year	1	1.0
First year	48	49.5
Second year	21	21.6
Third year	15	15.5
Fourth year	11	11.3
Fifth year	1	1.0
Total	97	100.0

Table 6.4 Frequencies and percentages of different age groups in different year of study of the English questionnaire respondents

Age group	Foundation year	First year	Second year	Third year	Fourth year	Fifth year
Under18	1	1	0	0	0	0
18-20	0	37	13	3	1	0
21-23	0	6	7	10	10	1
24-26	0	1	1	1	0	0
Over26	0	3	0	1	0	0
Total	1	48	21	15	11	1

In addition to the above demographical information, the respondents also gave their field of. As shown in figure 6.1 below, the respondents are from relatively diverse academic backgrounds, with students in arts & humanities degrees outnumbering the rest. While the current study did not utilise the students' academic background as a variable, it is likely that students with different academic backgrounds have different views towards and usage of social media and technology (and this has reflected in the focus group data where certain academic backgrounds students find social media particularly helpful for their learning).

Figure 6.1 Field of study of the English questionnaire respondents



To summarise, the demographical information obtained from the English questionnaire indicated that the majority of respondents were young adults who fell within the age range of 18-20. This may explain why nearly half of the participants were in their first year of study. Though in small numbers, there were three mature students in the questionnaire population. In terms of gender, over 70% of UK respondents were female students. Lastly, the respondents represented a diverse range of academic backgrounds. While demographic variables like gender were not included as independent variables in this analysis, it is still important to present the demographic characteristics of the dataset. This is necessary in order to demonstrate the potential biases that may exist based on the composition of the population under study. By providing an overview of the demographic features, we can see any potential sources of bias and ensure a transparent representation of the data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the research findings within the context of the studied population.

6.2.3. General user habits and digital environment.

This section addresses how respondents accessed technology, the key platforms they used, the frequency of use, and their perceptions of use. Each subsections targets a specific aspect of technology usage and the digital environment these respondents are situated in.

6.2.3.1 Accessibility

Participants were asked about the practical aspects of internet use, including the type of connections and the electronic devices owned, as well as an internet accessibility scale rating.

Table 6.5 presents the frequencies and percentages of different types of internet connections accessible to the respondents, as indicated in the questionnaire. According to Table 6.5, Wi-Fi and Mobile data (4G/3G) were the most popular options, with 97.9% of the total sample reporting access to Wi-Fi and 85.6% choosing mobile data. Additionally, Table 6.6 displays the results of the frequencies and percentages of respondents who selected one or multiple internet connection options. It reveals that 72.2% of the total sample had access to two types of internet connections, likely consisting of Wi-Fi and mobile data based on the previous findings. This analysis reveals the diversity of methods employed by participants to connect to the internet. It indicates that a significant number of participants utilise multiple options, depending on their surroundings or personal preferences.

Table 6.5 Means of Internet Connections: frequencies (UK)

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Means of Internet Connections	Phone line dial-up	7	3.5%	7.2%
	Wi-Fi/Wireless	95	48.0%	97.9%
	Ethernet	12	6.1%	12.4%
	4G/3G	83	41.9%	85.6%
	Unsure	1	0.5%	1.0%
	Other	0	0	0
Total		139	100.0%	140.4%

Table 6.6 numbers selected ways of internet connections (UK)

Number of internet connections	Frequency	Percent
1	13	13.4
2	70	72.2
3	11	11.3
4	3	3.1
Total	99	100.0

Regarding the electronic devices owned by the respondents, Table 6.7 provides the frequency distribution of each device selected. The results indicate that smartphones and PCs were the most commonly owned devices among the participants, with 96.9% and 91.8% of the respondents owning them, respectively.

Furthermore, the respondents were found to possess multiple electronic devices. As depicted in Table 6.8, more than half of the respondents (57.7%) owned two devices, while approximately one-third of them owned three devices. These findings highlight the prevalence of digital technologies among the surveyed population, as a majority of the participants reported owning multiple electronic devices.

Table6.7 – Devices owned: frequencies (UK)

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Electronic Devices Owned_CN	PC	89	39.9%	91.8%
	Smart phone	94	42.2%	96.9%
	Tablet	34	15.2%	35.1%
	Other	6	2.7	6.2%
Total		191	100.0%	229.9%

Table 6.8 Device owned: multiple responses selected (UK)

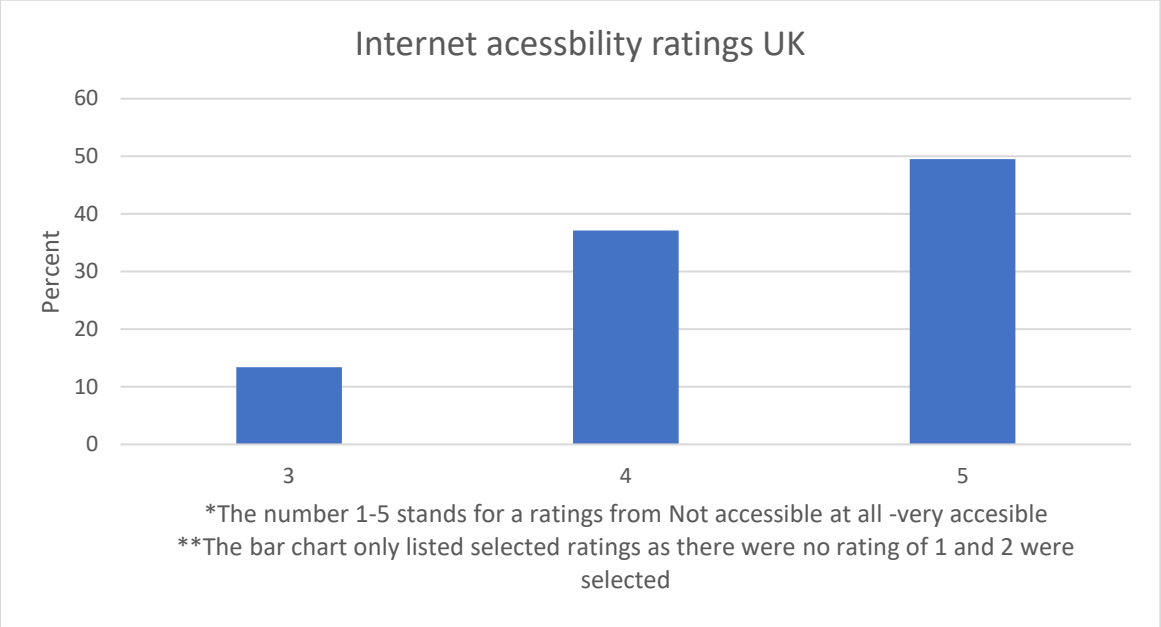
Number of devices	Frequency	Percent
1	7	7.2
2	56	57.7
3	32	33.0
4	2	2.1
Total	97	100.0

The data presented in Table 6.9 indicates that the most frequent response (mode), was a rating of 5, suggesting a high level of perceived accessibility. Moreover, the mean average rating of 4.36 further supports this finding. Notably, figure 6.2, depicting a bar chart representation, illustrates the absence of ratings 1 and 2, indicating that no respondents selected these lower accessibility ratings. The prevalence of multiple internet connection options among the respondents, as established in previous findings, provides a context that explains the frequent selection of the highest rating, 5, indicating "very accessible," when assessing internet accessibility. Given that a significant number of participants have access to diverse means of connecting to the internet, it is understandable that they would perceive the internet as highly accessible.

Table 6.9 Mean and mode of internet accessibility rating (UK)

N	97
Mean	4.36
Mode	5

Figure 6.2 Frequencies of English questionnaire respondents' Internet accessibility ratings on a scale of 1-5.



6.2.3.2 Key platforms

Table 6.10 provides the frequencies and percentages of social media platforms utilized by the respondents. In addition to the pre-listed options, participants were given the opportunity to provide their own responses under the category of "other." The results indicate that Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp were the most popular social media platforms among the respondents, with each receiving over 80% of the responses. Meanwhile, Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat and QQ were significantly less popular. Specifically, WeChat, the most popular Chinese platform in this dataset, was reported to be used by only 11.3% of the total sample.

Table 6.11 reveals that the respondents were active users of multiple social media platforms. The highest percentage, comprising 29.9% of the total sample, reported using five different social media platforms at the time of data collection. Additionally, 24.7% of the respondents were active on four platforms. Interestingly, only a small proportion, 4.1%, reported using just one platform. These findings indicate that the respondents are inclined to utilise multiple social media platforms simultaneously, with approximately one-third of them using five different platforms. This demonstrates the English questionnaire respondents' familiarity with and engagement in social media. The data suggests that the respondents are well-versed

in navigating various social media platforms and that these platforms are likely to be mainstream western social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp.

Table 6.10 Frequencies of selected social media platforms by English questionnaire respondents

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Slected _platforms_CN[a]	Facebook	87	20.4%	89.7%
	WhatsApp	81	19.0%	83.5%
	Instagram	83	19.4%	85.6%
	Snapchat	64	15.0%	66.0%
	Twitter	47	11.0%	48.5%
	LinkedIn	27	6.3%	27.8%
	Wechat	11	2.6%	11.3%
	Weibo	7	1.6%	7.2%
	QQ	9	2.1%	9.3%
	Zhihu	5	1.2%	5.2%
	Douyin	3	0.7%	3.1%
	Others	3	0.7%	3.1%
Total		427	100.0%	440.2%

Table 6.11 Numbers of selected social media platforms (UK)

Number of platforms selected	Frequency	Percent
1	4	4.1
2	7	7.2
3	16	16.5
4	24	24.7
5	29	29.9
6	10	10.3
7	2	2.1
8	1	1.0
9	2	2.1
10	2	2.1
Total	97	100.0

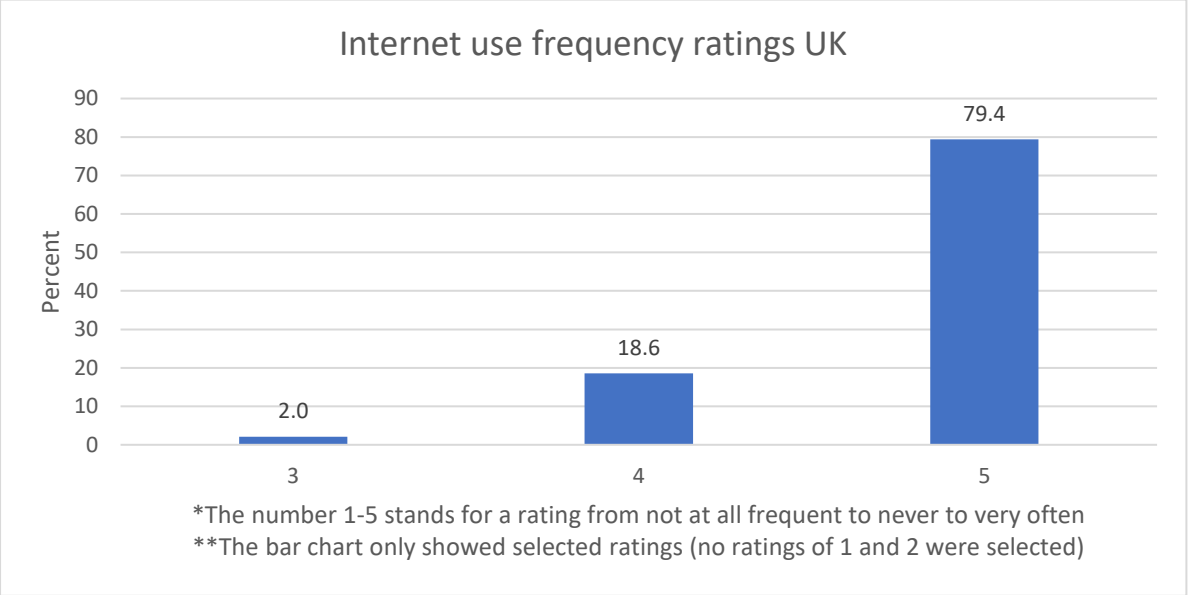
6.2.3.3 Frequency of use

Regarding the frequency of internet use, the data presented in Table 6.12 and figure 6.3 provide insights into the respondents' self-rated ratings on a scale of 1 to 5. The findings indicate that a significant majority of respondents, accounting for 79.4%, rated themselves at the highest level of frequency, ranging from 1 (Not at all frequent) to 5 (Very Often). Notably, no ratings of 1 or 2 (indicating low frequency) were reported in this dataset. The average (mean) rating of 4.77 reflects a high level of frequency of internet use among the majority of participants. This indicates that the respondents reported engaging with the internet quite frequently in their daily lives.

Table 6.12 Mean and mode of internet use frequency ratings (UK)

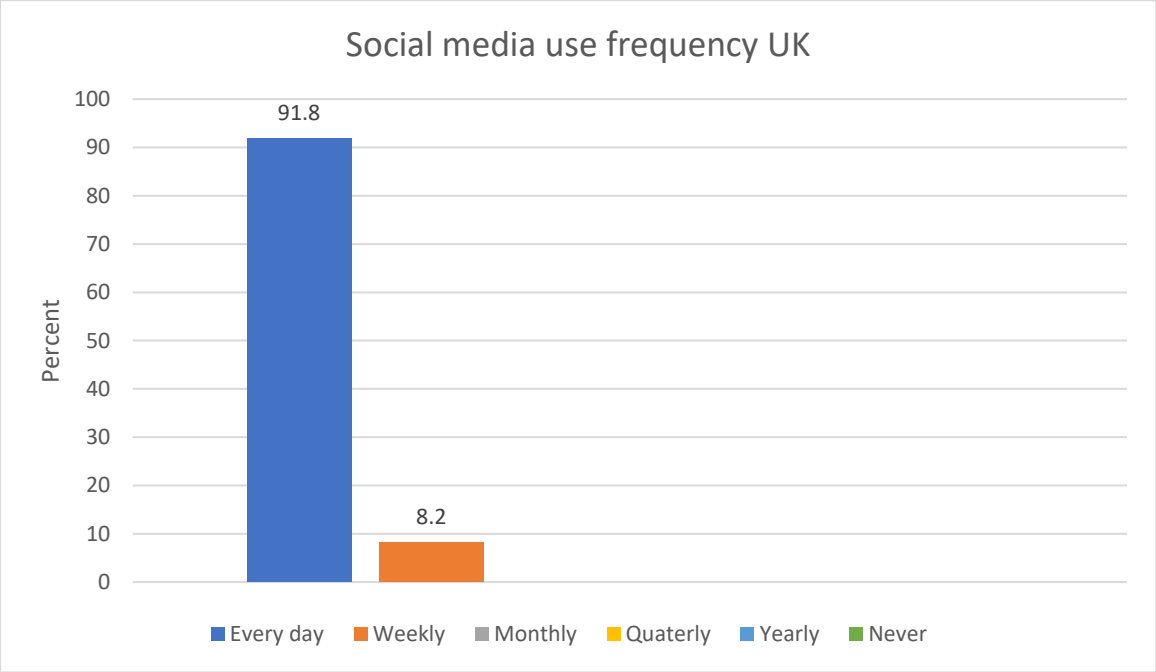
N	97
Mean	4.77
Mode	5

Figure 6.3 Internet use frequency (UK)



Furthermore, as outlined in the "key platforms" section, the respondents reported using multiple social media platforms. It is not surprising to see a vast majority (91.8%) of the sample reported utilising social media on a daily basis. This reported frequent social media use is also consistent with their frequent internet use.

Figure 6.4 social media use frequency (UK)



6.2.3.4 Perceptions of use (Reasons, advancements, statements)

This sub-section explores the findings regarding the reasons participants reported for using social media, and their perception of their engagements with and through social media.

According to Table 6.13, the primary reasons cited by respondents for using social media are socialising (93.8%) and pursuing interests/hobbies (82.5%). Moreover, 44.3% of the total sample indicated using social media for academic purposes, although the exact meaning of "academic" remains unclear for individual respondents. Further in-depth discussions were conducted during the focus groups to explore this aspect.

The data indicates that the respondents not only engaged with multiple social media platforms frequently but also did so with various purposes. As indicated in Table 6.14, the largest proportion of respondents (40.2%) selected two reasons for using social media, while 36.1% cited three reasons from the options provided in the questionnaire, namely, socialising and pursuing interests and hobbies. This suggests that many respondents chose multiple answers to describe their reasons/purposes for using social media, as the reasons provided in the questionnaire item were descriptive and limited in terms of options. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of their reasons, further exploration was conducted during the focus groups to obtain insights into the participants' perspectives. For example, what do the university students in the UK consider to be “academic” reasons for using social media.

Table 6.13 Frequencies of reasons for using social media by English questionnaire respondents.

		Responses		Percent of
		N	Percent	Cases
Selected reasons	Socialise	91	39.6%	93.8%
	Business	16	7.0%	16.5%
	Academic	43	18.7%	44.3%
	Interests/hobbies	80	34.8%	82.5%
Total		241	100.0%	243.4%

Table 6.14 Numbers of selected reasons for using social media

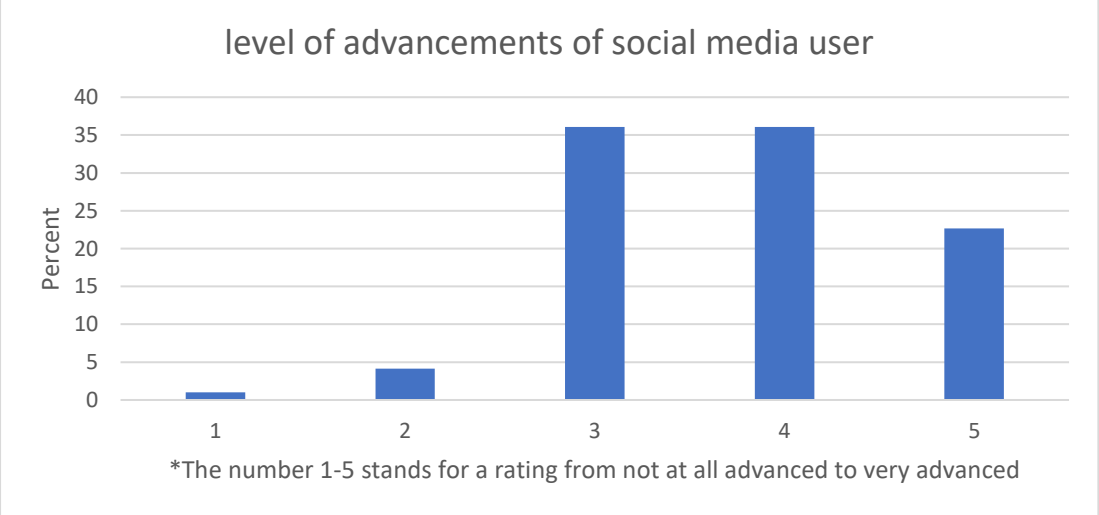
		Frequency	Percent
Numbers of selected Reasons	1.00	15	15.5
	2.00	39	40.2
	3.00	35	36.1
	4.00	8	8.2
	Total	97	100.0

Although the above findings suggested that the respondents were likely to be quite familiar with social media, when asked about how 'advanced' they felt as a user, participants were less confident. Tables 6.15 and Figure 6.5 shows the results from a question asking participants how advanced they think they are as a social media user, ranking from *1* (not at all advanced) to *5* (very advanced). The two tables suggest that most respondents rated themselves either *3* or *4*. The average (mean) of *3.75* places respondents between neutral to advanced.

Table 6.15 *Mean and mode of social media advancement rating*

N	97
Mean	3.75
Mode	3[56]

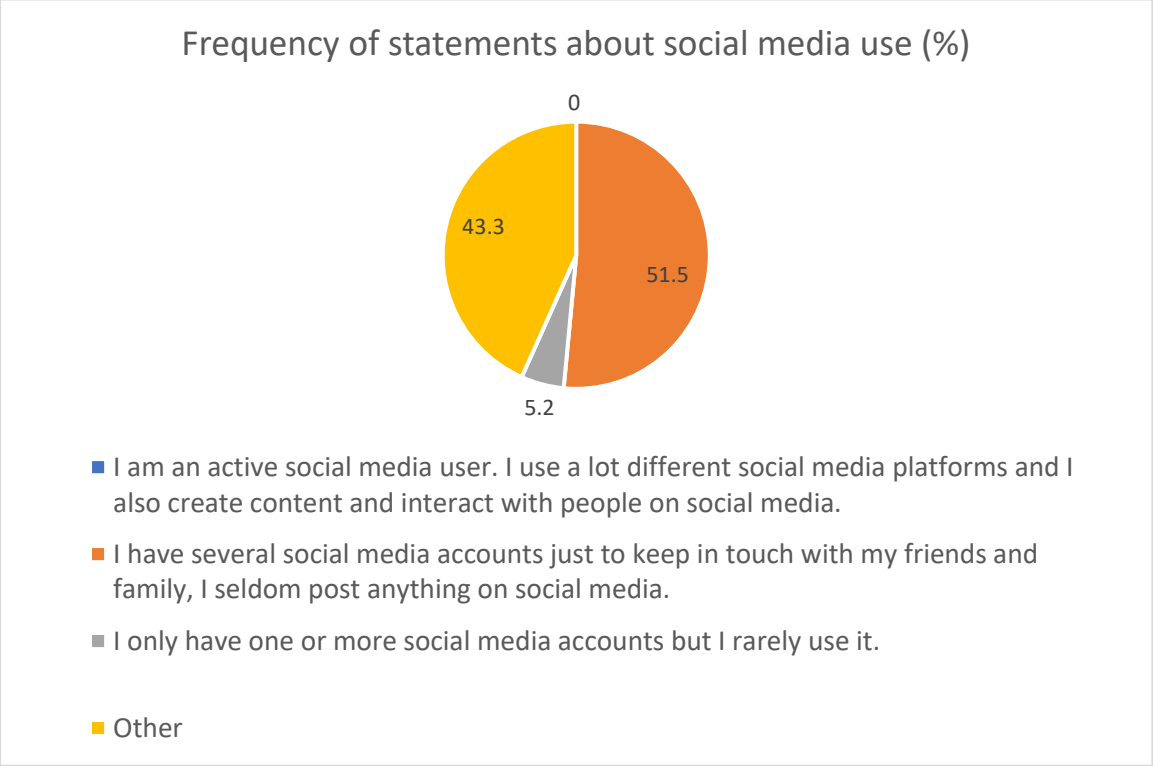
Figure 6. 5 ratings of advancement of social media use (UK)



[56] Multiple modes exist. Both are 3.

Figure 6.6 shows the results of respondents choosing the statement about social media use that most likely describes their own situation. We can see that no respondents chose statement one, therefore no blue portion is visible in the pie chart in figure 6.6. Most of the reponses fell under statement two (51.5%) and statement four (43.3%), and the rest of the responses (5.2%) were under statement three. This shows that about half (51.5%) of the respondents owned social media accounts and used them actively but usage was limited to scrolling and browsing and necessary posting of contents on those platforms, as suggested in statement two; only a small number (5.2%) of the respondents stated that they owned social media accounts but rarely used them, whereas 43.3% of the respondents considered that none of the descriptions in those statements suited them.

Figure 6.6 Statements about social media use (UK)



This section has presented findings related to the practical aspects of social media and technology usage, as well as initial insights into the respondents' habits in this regard. Overall, the UK respondents demonstrated ready access to the internet and ownership of electronic devices such as PCs and mobile phones, establishing a foundation for their frequent use of

the internet and engagement with social media platforms. Furthermore, the respondents were found to utilise multiple social media applications/platforms for various purposes, with a preference for mainstream Western platforms. However, it is worth noting that some respondents expressed a moderate level of engagement with social media, indicating a certain level of reservation. Additionally, a significant portion of respondents indicated that they primarily used social media for browsing and scrolling, rather than actively posting or sharing content.

6.2.4 The use of social media and learning

6.2.4.1 Attitudes

Respondents were presented with a list of 10 Likert scale items which aimed at collecting data around their attitudes towards social media use and learning. The results are summarised in Table 6.16 below:

Table 6.16 Percentages of 10 likert scale questions on social media and learning

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Stronly disagree
1.Social media is useful for learning.	13.5%	51%	28.1%	4.2%	3.1%
2. Social media should be allowed in formal learning situation. e.g. during the lecture/seminar.	7.4%	25.3%	36.8%	26.3%	4.2%
3. Social media helps with my university work.	11.6%	32.6%	30.5%	20%	5.3%
4. Social media is a distraction from my university study.	27.4%	56.8%	9.5%	5.3%	1.1%
5. I can learn things that cannot be learned in formal education on social media.	11.6%	41.1%	26.3%	15.8%	5.3%
6. I use social media spontaneously to learn new things	11.5%	45.8%	19.8%	20.8%	2.1%
7. My use of social media for learning is based on my own interests.	27.1%	52.1%	18.8%	2.1%	0%
8. I enjoy using social media to learn.	12.6%	43.2%	35.8%	6.3%	2.1%
9. I am skeptical of social media's potential for learning.	13.5%	35.4%	28.1%	21.9%	1%
10. I have a positive attitude towrads the use of social media in learning situations.	5.3%	37.9%	34.7%	22.1%	0%

The findings presented in Table 6.16 indicate that respondents have mixed feelings regarding the use of social media for learning purposes. While many of them recognize the usefulness of social media for learning, as evident from the results of Statement 1, and enjoy their learning experiences through social media, as shown in Statement 8, they appear to be more hesitant in fully agreeing with a broad statement affirming positive attitudes towards social media use for learning in general, as indicated by Statement 10. These results suggest that while respondents acknowledge the benefits and enjoyment derived from using social media for learning, they may still harbour reservations or uncertainties when considering it in a more general context.

There is some suggestion that this may be due to perceived negatives of social media. For example, 56.8% agreed and 27.5% of the respondents strongly agreed that social media is a distraction for their studies. This cannot be ascertained from quantitative data alone and will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter through the focus group findings.

In addition to these findings, the majority of respondents felt that their learning on social media was based on their own interests and many of them enjoyed using social media for learning. This highlights some of the positive uses of social media for learning, which will be further explored later in this chapter. Moreover, around half of the respondents felt that social media could be a good supplement to formal teaching and learning in the university. Less respondents agreed that social media should be allowed in formal teaching and learning settings.

6.2.4.2 Ways of using social media for learning

Receiving and researching information

When providing examples of the use of social media for learning, the majority of the respondents' answers can be categorised under 'receiving and researching information'. This broad category includes practices such as getting news updates on social media, researching topic of interests, and getting academic information.

Some respondents mentioned that they received news updates from social media:

> *"I've used social media to learn about news and current events in the world coming from the voices of people involved rather than new show sites";*
> *"Subscribe academic accounts and read daily news and digests";*
> *"Read many news articles on Facebook newsfeed, for example".*

Additionally, this news and updates were often to do with politics:

> *"I use it see tweets about current political issues"*;
> *"Following the page simply politics to find out about what's going on in politics";*
> *"Videos or posts about Social activist movements, global warming updates, political changes";*

Sometimes, these students do further research on things that they find interesting:

> *"I follow informational pages so I get to learn about something new every day, and if it's interesting, I might look into it on my own and learn even more".*

"I follow a number of fact- based pages, so if they share a fact which I find interesting, I sometimes go on to do my own research based on this."

Some students followed educational social media accounts/pages for academic knowledge.

"Frequently, I use social media to keep up to date with environmental issues (my topic of interest"";
"I have an educational twitter account where I follow educational resources and things that may be suitable for my degree";
"Following accounts that are to do with studying, for example, Studyblr";
"Following science student pages".

Some people searched social media for information that was more specific to their academic tasks:

"I use Twitter to find examples and evidence to support my arguments in assignments";
"Find a case study in essays and presentations; some knowledge didn't get provided in class".

The examples elicited above show that these students were using social media to receive and research information (in a broad sense). Although some of the examples relate to their studies, the main purpose is more to do with keeping themselves informed rather than actually studying on these social media apps/platforms.

Interests-led learning on social media

Among all the written responses received, many people mentioned specific subjects of interest or hobbies as their examples of using social media for learning. This might be seen as overlapping with the previous category of 'receiving and researching information'. However, unlike in the previous category, I have summarised answers that pointed out the specific topics they were interested in, especially responses that showed them intentionally learning or actively seeking information on these subjects.

More often, their learning seems to be dependent on personal hobbies or what they were interested in. This may not necessarily be to do with their university degree. See some examples below:

"…I have also used it to learn about different sexualities, and discover my own (sexuality)";
"I usually learn about racial and religious violence from people it has affected. And I get general wellbeing and medical information from doctors online. I sometimes learn about food and nutrition as well".

"Twitter helps me to learn about feminist theory by reading other people's experiences and encouraging me to understand and empathise with situations which I haven't experienced myself";
"I watch YouTube and Instagram video tutorials to learn new art skills such as calligraphy, water colouring and bullet journaling. I also watch YouTube videos to aid my scientific knowledge during revision";
"I have never been officially taught how to cook/bake so sometimes social media allows me to learn about this with tutorial videos";
I taught myself new gym routines and exercises";
"People post tips and advice within pages that I am part of, which I use for my hobby of horse riding";
"I sometime watch some influencer's videos on YouTube and Weibo which are related to English study".

When social media apps/platforms used for such learning purposes were mentioned, Instagram and YouTube were the most cited although not everyone provided details of the apps/platforms they were using.

Learning through social media communications

As one of the functions of social media platforms is communication, it is not surprising to see these students utilising the platforms to communicate with their peers over study-related matters. The respondents thought that this helped their learning. This included using 'group chat' affordance on social media to communicate with their course mates over course-related questions:

"Having group chats with my seminar group on where I can ask questions on work, deadlines and what room we are in";
"I use social media to communicate with others on my course in order to learn new things regarding the course or find things that I am unsure about".

Sometimes social media was used simply to ask other people to revise and do group projects together: *"I use it to communicate with my peers for revision and group work".*

Certain social media platforms, especially the ones with instant messaging function (e.g. Facebook messenger, WhatsApp) were frequently used by these university students when for this type of communication, as in the following examples:

"I use Facebook messenger to communicate and share notes with classmates";
"Using messenger apps to coordinate meeting up with people for group work, or discussing module content I am not sure about".

Additionally, social media provided these university students with alternative ways of seeking help in class, particularly during big lectures where there might be larger numbers of students attending. This was said to be helpful for people who easily felt anxious when asking questions in public, as in the example:

> *"If I'm stuck about something in the lecture, rather than making a fool of myself and interrupting the lecturer (I have anxiety issues), I will just message my friends on social media who are more knowledgeable".*

Other than their course mates or friends in the university, some students also commented that they would use social media to stay connected with people online or find people who of similar interests:

> *"Using social media to keep in touch with science communicators as well as academics i.e (#RealTimeChem on Twitter)";*
> *"As the first year to sit two brand new a-levels, social media was used a lot to try and find others who were doing the same exam and trying to find consistency in the exam boards' requests".*

It appears that social media is used broadly as a communicative device for a range of educational purposes, both class-related and more broadly understood: from finding out the location of a classroom to getting help from their friends instead of asking the lecturers directly during the lecture, to staying in touch with like-minded people online. Although these students did not directly use social media to study certain subjects or topics, they found that this communication with their peers aided their learning to varying degrees. This has implications for our understanding of formal and informal learning, a concept which will be explored more fully in the discussion chapter.

I do not use social media for learning

Among all the responses received, four respondents stated that they did not use social media for learning. Moreover, one participant noted that they thought of social media as "more of a distraction" rather than a learning tool. Although the respondent did not deny using social media for learning, they were somewhat scathing of the practice, as can be seen in the example below:

> *"Mostly only for communication with friends directly or in group chats, the majority of the 'posting' seems to be the antithesis of learning, as people post incomplete*

information about topics they know too little about to realise just how incomplete the information is".

We can see that this respondent only approved of communications on social media apps/platforms that could be useful; however, he/she also viewed most of the information that was posted on social media as not for learning since it was not reliable. The amount of misinformation or fake news in social media posts seemed to contribute to why he/she viewed social media as not for learning.

Other than the responses that contained a direct "no" such as the examples mentioned above, some respondents seemed to be confused by the question itself, leaving a one word answer "unsure". This could be in part due to the respondents being unsure about the definition of social media in this question, especially what counts as "social media" as in the example below:

"If YouTube can be classed as a form of social media, I've watched numerous videos relating to chemistry, on subjects I can't quite get my head around. Other than that, I wouldn't say I have used it for those purposes".

We can see that this respondent was not sure whether YouTube can be considered as social media.

It appears from this that there is some confusion about definitions of learning and social media, topics which are explored in more detail during the focus groups. The open-ended question itself did not specify what types of learning and did not define social media, allowing respondents to demonstrate their own definitions of these broad terms by not pre-determining the definitions of social media. The rest of the responses contained various practices of using social media for learning which I will discuss in the following sections.

6.2.4.3 Benefits of using social media for learning:
Increased access to information

One of the benefits repeatedly mentioned by respondents was how abundant the resources on social media are. Not only were they able to find various kinds of information on social media, they were also exposed to different ideas and information which they might not able to get from other outlets:

"Benefits- free and easy to access, allows people to access a variety of opinions and figures quickly";

"Benefits: I can get access to the information I want easily and get more different perspectives from people from social media";
"Benefits - lots of information is readily available from a variety of sources, and it may be quicker than asking someone in real life".

Moreover, some students pointed out that social media is good for physically or mentally disadvantaged people in that they can obtain information more easily. For instance, it is helpful for someone who has social anxieties to ask questions on social media apps/platforms instead of in real life.

Engaging learning experiences

Some respondents further explained the benefit of social media for learning as it is more engaging than traditional forms:

"Engaging and relatable way of learning for current generations";
"Benefits - quick and easy way to engage students in learning by using a tool they're fond of";
"One of the benefits is that you get to learn in an informal situation and it is often fun and engaging to chat and read people's comments under certain posts so it doesn't feel like learning";
"It's more interesting and active than other forms";
"Benefits: easily accessible outside of classroom, possibly feels less like learning".'

As we can see from the above, these respondents mentioned that 'this generation' of people tend to be 'fond' of using social media, it is a widely used tool. The participants suggest that learning through social media has the potential to be more active and interesting than other forms of learning. This can even be seen as not 'feel(ing) like learning', as one of the respondents noted. This has implications for a discussion about informal learning, and as respondents reflected on their activities on social media, recognising that learning happens even when 'reading the comments'.

Enabling communications

Participants also highlighted another benefit related to the 'communication' aspect of social media, whether it is between their friends or course mates or with 'online' friends. To some respondents, this communication promotes learning: *"the benefits are that you could share what you're learning with others, which could improve your own understanding through explaining".* Sometimes, sharing their experiences could simply be encouraging to other people who may be struggling at the same time, as this respondent points out:*"…being able to connect with other people that share your struggles is encouraging".*

Moreover, this communication may also help with in-class teaching. One respondent mentioned that he/she wishes that they could communicate their ideas during a lecture: "*It may be beneficial if people in a lecture theatre can communicate ideas, encourages open thinking".*

6.2.4.5 Challenges of using social media for learning

Distraction

In relation to the challenges when using social media for learning, nearly all respondents expressed concerns about 'distraction' from their study and learning, even though sometimes they were using the platforms for learning as discussed in the previous section. For example, one respondent said that "*social media is distracting because of the amount of content online, it can take away focus from the learning objectives*". Many participants also had similar experiences of getting distracted by other non-study related content on social media platforms*: "It can be distracting, there are lots of interesting looking things and it's easy to lose focus".* Some highlighted specific platforms such as Instagram: *"It's a distraction from the task as it is easy to get side-tracked on apps such as Instagram"*. Others highlighted specific aspects of social media, such as the social aspects: "*Challenge: easier to be distracted by social functions of social media."* Distraction also existed when they were in the classroom: *"Challenges: Can be distracting in lessons and disrespectful to the teacher".*

Given the myriad uses and functions of social media, incorporating social media into learning fully, presents challenges and benefits. The participants suggest that it can be distracting when you are using it for learning since it has so many other functions, including social aspects, that participants highlight as both useful for formal and informal learning, but also a potential distraction at the same time. This tension will be explored more fully in the next chapter. One respondent hinted at this issue, noting that distraction could occur both in lessons and when studying alone. Social media use is potentially hugely distracting despite its benefits for learning.

Concerns over the information online

Another frequently mentioned challenge was regarding the content on social media platforms. Although these students acknowledged the benefit of accessing all kinds of information using social media, they also raised concerns around the veracity and usefulness of the information

To them, online content was seen as often unregulated, presenting concerns around misinformation and propaganda, as in the examples below:

> *"Misinformation/"fake news", hidden agendas, no 3rd party checking of data etc.";*
> *"Can be unregulated (not everything on social media is right) but with enough input from everyone I believe it can be a fairly good source";*
> *'Risks - fake news and propaganda which can distort learning and mislead individuals".*

They also highlighted that the amount of information on social media can be overwhelming and prolong the process of finding the right information they need. They highlighted in particular, issues of finding reliable or useful information on social media, making learning on social media difficult:

> *"Wading through the relentless heap of useless information is the greatest challenge. the use of facebook groups with targeted aims is useful but they don't seem to function very highly as they're not encouraged to give any structure to their information, so you get memes instead of data";*
> *'Whilst social media has a great breadth and depth, that can become a double -edged sword. In the age of fake news, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to tell apart genuine and fact checked sources apart from fake ones. As such, many now turn towards unqualified 'academics' online".*

Apart from the challenges of finding useful information and identifying legitimate information, participants also highlighted that some content on social media platforms can have a negative impact on people:

> *"… it can also affect one's perception of political correctness due to the fluctuating culturally relative racism and social attitudes";*
> *"negative feedback from people";*
> *"and sometimes be a platform for trolls[57], cyberbullying and photos which reduce self confidence".*

We can see that many respondents were aware that not everything on social media is true and its impact on individuals' perceptions and even mental health could be harmful.

[57] people who leave an intentionally annoying or offensive message on the internet to upset others.

Difficult to integrate social media in the classroom

The last challenge to emerge from the open-ended question is the difficulty in cooperating on social media, especially in the traditional classroom settings., as in the two responses cited below:

> *"Integration of social media to traditional classroom teaching/academic setting";*
> *"Challenges include being hard to integrate social media use into the traditional lecture/seminar format".*

Both of the responses emphasise the word 'traditional' classroom or teaching format, which also indicates the lack of presence of social media in traditional university teaching and learning activities.

6.2.5 Questionnaire findings summary

Based on the quantitative findings, the English questionnaire respondents were a group of undergraduate students, studying various subjects in the same institution. Just over 70% of the total respondents were found to be female students. Among them, 49.5% were in their first year and correspondingly, 55.7% of them were aged between 18-20 years old. Though only constituting a small percentage, 4.1% students were mature students (over 26 years old). Although the current study did not further examine possible differences or relationships in terms of demographic variables, it is important to be aware of the demographical features of this dataset as it may explain some statistical findings of the dataset. The study also found that respondents felt they had high access to the internet and were using the internet and social media quite frequently. Many of them reported using multiple social media platforms for various reasons. The majority of the respondents used social media for browsing and reading, though some of the respondents did create or post content.

The participants highlighted the complexities when relating social media to learning. Initially, more than a quarter of the respondents included "academic" as (one of) their reason(s) for social media use. However, the results of the ten likert scale of the statements relating to social media, reflected the respondents' somewhat "mixed feelings" towards social media and learning. On the one hand, they were aware of the learning resources and opportunities available on social media platforms and were likely to find information they needed based on

what they were interested in. On the other hand, they were also likely to be distracted by social media use and were aware that the information was not always reliable.

The qualitative findings from the two open-ended questions further added depth to these responses, highlighting both benefits and challenges. A small number of respondents were sceptical of the idea of using social media for learning due to the detrimental factors, namely that it constituted a distraction from their studies. There was also some uncertainty about what counted as social media and whether communications on social media with their peers was considered using social media for learning. Overall, the findings suggest that the respondents used social media for information and communication; however, they were also troubled by the distraction social media be and concerned about the credibility of information online, and the not so common presence of social media in formal learning and teaching situations. These findings echo previous quantitative findings (attitude table) on the mixed feelings towards social media use and learning. However, due to the often brief and concise nature of open-ended responses, it is worth comparing and combing with focus group findings.

6.3 Focus group findings

6.3.1 Notes on the focus groups and the participants

The focus groups conducted in the UK consisted of five groups of undergraduate students studying in the same university. The students in each focus group ranged from five to eight people. These students came from diverse academic backgrounds and different years of study, ranging from foundation year to fourth year. The background of each participant can be found in the tables below:

Table 6.17 UK focus group one

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Year of Study
Teddy	M	Did not mention	Education	1
Zed	M	21	Medicine	4
Tee	F	22	Medicine	4
M	F	22	Medicine	4
Blueberry	F	Did not mention	Medicine	1
A	F	18	Medicine	1

Table 6.18 UK focus group two

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Year of Study
H	F	19	Business and economics	1
P	F	19	Politics and philosophy	1
C	M	22	Accounting and finance	1
J	M	18	Pharmacy	1
M	F	18	Business and management	1

Table 6.19 UK focus group three

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Year of Study
Yi	M	19	Psychology	1
A	M	20	Chemistry	3
O	M	19	Psychology	1
S	F	19	Economics	1
G	F	19	History	1
D	M	20	Business and Information systems	2
E	F	20	Geography	2
S	F	20	French	2

Table 6.20 UK focus group four

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Year of Study
O	F	21	Computing science	2
A	F	20	Psychology	3
E	F	20	Culture, literature and politics	2
G	F	23	Physiotherapy	Did not mention
L	F	20	Geography and international developments	3
T	M	18	International relations	1
D	F	19	Law	1

Table 6.21 UK focus group five

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major	Year of Study
L	F	19	Economics	1
M	F	19	Psychology	2
N	M	19	Environmental sciences	2
I	F	18	Medicine	Foundation year
G	F	18	Biochemistry	Foundation year
Meg	F	21	Psychology	3

Group one (hereafter UKFG1) consisted of five medical students and one education student. They were recruited through a combination of sampling methods: some were recruited through the questionnaire and these participants brought friends.

Group two (UKFG2) was formed with the help of one student who showed an interest in the questionnaire. This student then invited her flatmates who were interested in this research to take part in this focus group.

Group three (UKFG3), Group four (UKFG4) and Group five (UKFG5) all formed similarly, with students who had previously shown an interest in participating in the focus group (left contact details in the questionnaire). However, the participants in each group not necessarily know each other. Because the formation of each group was according to the time and place that were convenient for them.

In contrast to the focus groups conducted in China, I provided focus group feedback sheets to the participants at the end of the data collection so that they could leave any comments if they wanted to. This helped me improve small details alongside the data collection process.

6.3.2 Social media in everyday life as a university student

6.3.2.1 Social media usage and preferences

This sub-theme of 'social media usage and preferences' was based on the participants' experiences with social media use as appeared in the focus group data. This includes aspects such as 'frequent usage of social media'; 'versatile social media'; 'early exposure to social media'.

First of all, I would like to address the aspect of frequent usage as shown in the focus group transcripts. Many of participants were found to be spending a considerable amount of time on social media daily. Thus, the code of 'frequent usage of social media' was used multiple times when analysing the focus group data. For example, group five's participants mentioned that they frequently checked their messaging apps, scrolling through platforms like Twitter:

> *N: yeah, same, like I use it on my phone like EVERY couple of minutes maybe, not always lol but like whenever I have spare time, I would check...or like message my friends or if they message me yeah pretty much every day.*
> *I: hmm my phone tells me how much I use… and I'm like five hours a day (laugh).*
> *G: yeah, I'm on my phone every day, maybe not all the time but like every couple of minutes I will just check if someone has just texted me and I spent most of my time on the phone in the evenings after the lectures.*
> *Meg: yeah, I do the same, a couple of hours scrolling and (laughs) then you realised the time you spent on twitter you were like OMG I spent two hours on twitter (laugh)…*
> (Excerpts from UKFG5)

As we can see from the above excerpt, different participants in group five had similar experiences of spending a considerable amount of time on social media platforms. In fact, similar conversations can be found in other focus groups in this study. The participants often reported scrolling on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and YouTube on their phone without realising how much time they had spent, only to discover that they spent hours on social media almost every day.

However, not all social media platforms were used the same, or as frequently by the participants. Some participants showed a preference for different social media platforms as certain social media platforms were used more often than others, as in these examples below:

> *Zed: right, hmm, so WhatsApp and Facebook messenger I would say I use them pretty much every day, and I forgot to mention hmm you reminded me, yes! I also use Reddit, and I just have a look on that every day. Snapchat and Instagram...hmm, not very frequently, probably once a three to five days (chuckles).*
> *T: WhatsApp every day, for communication purposes, and Facebook unfortunately I have to use it. I prefer not to use it, but I have to use it for societies and keeping, keeping that going really.*
> *A: I would say I use Instagram, two hours a day, and Reddit for usually half (an hour).*
> *(Excerpts from UKFG1)*

For messaging apps like WhatsApp and Facebook messenger, most participants were using them on a daily basis. The time spent on other social media apps/platforms varied from person to person.

Moreover, besides the communicative reasons why students relied on social media (which will be explored further in the next section 6.3.2.2), they were also using social media for other purposes such as entertainment and getting news updates, or for 'unconventional uses' such as using Snapchat for finding the location of seminar/lecture rooms:

> *"literally…. use snapchat to... find the room! (others shouting: Yes! find the room! laughs) which is social media which is mad (other: yeah!) you can use it to find where you are going…" (UKFG4).*

The multi-functional aspect of social media for these students probably also contributed to the reason why some of the participants in this study reported a tendency to use social media a lot:

> *O: How often do you use social media apps/ platforms like you mentioned before?*
> *Rest: everyday*
> *O: Yeah, I use like 24/7 cause it's like my main communication and entertainment, like you get those YouTube videos just entertainment (laughs) when you are procrastinating (laughs).*
> *D: Yeah, I would say probably like hourly (people in background: yeah)*
> *O: but even like when I'm like sleeping I still keep my internet on then when I wake up, I'm still like sort of up to date yeah.*
> *T: Unless I'm like sleeping or playing sports or like when I am out with my friends. It's pretty much most of the time.*
>
> *(Excerpt from UKFG4)*

Although the participants' descriptions about their social media use could be exaggerated at times, it is clear social media, alongside access to Wi-Fi, has become an important part of daily life, as participant E from group four comments:

> *"Can you imagine you go one day without it, like I can't imagine not using social media...when I moved to our new house we didn't have Wi-Fi that's stressful like there's no way no easy way to get hold of anybody!".*

In addition, through the participants' narratives of their social media usage and preferences, there is a sense that these participants were quite familiar with a wide range of social media apps/platforms. This was also my impression of the participants in China after the focus group

discussion. It intrigued me to find out when these university students started using social media. Thus, I added questions about this to the UK focus groups, noting that this question was not addressed in the Chinese focus groups. With this in mind, in the English focus group, participants were asked when they had started to use social media. The responses ranged from just five years old to 14 years old, with most people starting to use social media around 10-13 years old. However, using social media from a young age is not necessarily a good thing. Participants in group five talked about the embarrassing moments on social media that they now wished that they could delete:

> *I: I think it's when you get your first phone really (others: yeah yeah!) that's when you started to use social media, or like the first phone that has access to the internet.*
> *N: I would say yeah, like I didn't have a phone until I was thirteen but I was on Facebook about nine and it was like the worst decision ever! No one should be allowed to use Facebook at that age (laugh), I have to delete so much stuff, so embarrassing!*
> *(Excerpt from UKFG5)*

6.3.2.2 Communications and social networking

As seen in the previous section, many participants in this study had been using social media for a long time before they started university. While the information they found on social media was deemed not to have affected their decision to come to this university, social media was reported as helpful in finding flatmates/housemates in their first year. In addition, going to university had affected their social media use. For example, many university-related communications such peer communications and networking were held on social media. Moreover, in order to keep in touch with their course mates, getting late updates about the sports clubs or social events such as where the pre-drinks would be held, were all communicated via social media. So participants in this study often found themselves obligated to use social media. For example, Tee in group one mentioned that she created a Facebook account specifically for university. Similarly, G in group four described that she had started to use Facebook again because a lot of people used it in the university:

> *" I only recently got back into Facebook cause there was like a good maybe four years? I just wouldn't go on it. But then going to uni, people are like using it so I thought should get back on it.hmm… (Facebook) messenger! that's how I like to keep in touch with my course mates or like people from around uni".*

While participants did not directly link it to being a university student, they also mentioned that they created certain social media accounts after they became a university student (such

as the Chinese international students creating Facebook and WhatsApp accounts after they came to the UK).

In fact, since many university-related communications rely heavily on social media, G in group four expressed her frustration about having t to use social media in the university, even at times when she didn't want to:

> "*I think in the university context, for me like the kind of the frustrating thing is like if you are not on like anything you can miss so much! Like so many times, I am just taking a detox not on it like deleting my apps for like a week or so with sports especially you miss so much..social..training..kind like of like fomo like fear of missing out not up to date with everything*".

Based on the findings above, we can see that as a university student in this study, social media is used for communications and social networking.

6.3.2.3 Understandings about social media

This sub-theme was formed under similar codes in relation to the discussion about social media itself, such as debates over defining social media and confusions over what is meant by social media. Together with the two sub-themes introduced previously, they were merged into the first main theme of the focus group finding: social media in everyday life as a university student.

The participants in this study could easily name many social media platforms. Among all the social media apps/platforms they mentioned, the most popular ones were Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and YouTube. A small number of participants mentioned 'Chinese social media'. For example, B in group one frequently used the Chinese versions of popular western social media platforms:

> *"I use Chinese version of Reddit, like Zhihu and Baidu tieba, if you guys don't know it's okay, but like on that platform…I think put in a lot of information by produce …I produce some content as well'.*

Another participant in group two differentiated the social media platforms she used as 'Chinese social media' and 'British social media':

> *"For me, the most times when I use internet, I spend most of the time on social media, like WeChat, Facebook, like all the Chinese social media and British social media…".*

This phenomenon was quite common among the Chinese international students (who have disclosed that they're Chinese intentional students during the discussion), many of whom only started to use popular social media platforms after they came to here to study. For example, C in group two said: "*I also use WeChat in China, but when I come to the UK, I created Facebook and Instagram account WhatsApp account"*. This finding also reflected what I described in Chapter 2 in terms of the unique social media landscape in China.

From the findings above, it seems that the participants in this study were familiar with social media in general. However, some participants were still somewhat confused about what social media is and which apps or platforms could be considered as 'social media'. While most participants referred to social media as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram, confusions often arose when participants talked about platforms beyond these mainstream platforms:

> *T: Wait, is YouTube a social media?*
> *Ty: I think so*
> *T: It is? Ok*
> *M: Like Blackboard? Posting documents isn't it like... isn't that social media?*
> *T: Define social media?... (Inaudible, too many voices talking at the same time)*
> *Zed: So, define social media*
> *T: As?*
> *Zed: We have talked about platforms where, so Blackboard can be…*
> *M: (cut off) Blackboard is social media!*
> *Zed: Platforms where other individuals can share content…*
> *Ty: Get information*
> *Zed: Yeah*
>
> *(excerpt from UKFG1)*

Similar discussions occurred in other groups*:" I'm not sure if it's included Outlook? Is it social media? If not then no… (Y from UKFG3)"* and "*is Blackboard social media? I guess the forum part of it you can ask questions" (D from UKFG4)*. These participants tended to include other platform or tools such as Outlook email and Blackboard (a learning management system) that they often used as social media.

Other than the mainstream social media platforms mentioned and the educational technology platforms that they normally used as university students, some participants also considered dating apps like Tinder as social media:

O: Any other social media?
G: Does YouTube count?
O: Oh yeah it does!
A: Does Tinder?...(Burst of laughter, many people were talking in the background therefore inaudible for a while)
T: I think dating apps are social media as well!
O: Oh ok didn't know it was social media (laugh) learning something new every day!
(excerpt from UKFG4)

In addition to this, one participant in group two mentioned 'Spotify', a music streaming platform, as social media. I found it interesting as this was the first time someone mentioned this type of platform (music streaming) as social media. Therefore, I asked this group the following question during the short group interview conducted just at the end of the focus group:

The researcher: So, you think Spotify is a social media too?
J: urghhh I mean if you define social media, you could say it's a platform where people express themselves, and music is a form of expression, so you could potentially say it it's a social media.
M: Yeah things like groovy you can like make your own playlist, you can like make it for someone else you can both add music to it you can share, so I guess you could use that…
J: Also, Spotify you can have podcasts on it as well so...podcast you can learn different things so, personally I would say you can classify it as social media.
M: Yeah, it's very nice!
(UKFG2, post discussion Q&A)

As we can see from all the examples above, there was some confusion about whether certain platforms could be considered as social media and they tended to seek confirmation from other participants in the group as to whether one particular platform is social media or not. Through the communication between participants, a collective definition of what social media is emerged within the group.

This is broad and inclusive. For example, I summarised group three participants' definition of social media as 'a way of connecting, interacting with other people, in real-time and no distance limitations', based on the following conversation:

Y: What is social media? Examples?
Y: I think social media is a platform for you to interact with your friends when you are...not busy, so like Instagram, Facebook…
A: Yeah it's a way of interacting with people, yeah Facebook YouTube WhatsApp

O: It's just like a way that you can get to know people that you wouldn't otherwise be able to know
S: Just a way to talk to people like snapchat as well
G: Yeah connect to people
D: So connect to people across the world in real time
E: Yeah where connects to people and sort of representing yourself
S: I will go with anything that allows you…sort of…connects to people who might not physically there with you.

(Excerpts from UKFG3)

As we can see from the above, participants mentioned 'connecting with other people' many times. To them, the main function of social media seems to be about providing an opportunity for them to connect, communicate and interact with other people. This could be their friends from all over the world. This emphasis on the communication aspect of social media can be found in other groups who have addressed this question of what social media are. For example, group two's discussion on this question revealed similar responses:

H: And moving onto social media, what do you think social media is, can you list some examples?
P: I would say social media is a form of communication, so hmm, apps like Facebook, WhatsApp, or any apps in general, sort of to communicate with other people around the world.
C: It's probably a way to get information from each other, like the Facebook and Instagram, we can share our pictures or some useful information with each other, or like get information get the news…yeah, I like BBC
J: I would say like platforms to communicate, to explore, so like with WhatsApp, Facebook for communication, Twitter you can find the news, even YouTube people put content on it so people can learn stuff. People can like, do a lot on YouTube as well, so yeah
M: I think it's a good way to connect with people you probably wouldn't have met in your day to day life, like someone in America or something on Twitter.
H: For me, I think social media is a tool to communicate with others, and it's a platform to show your ideas and your daily life because many people like to post photos of their lives, where they go what they have eaten today on the social media, and sometimes can also show you their personality, it's a way to attract people to make friends with you.

(excerpts from UKFG2)

As we can see from the conversation in group two above, social media has certain features such as enabling communication and connection to other people, getting information and a way of presenting oneself online. This basically summarises the participants' understandings towards social media. Though confusion exists when deciding if certain platforms can be

considered as social media, participants do not limit the idea of social media to a number of popular social media platforms.

6.3.3 The role of social media in learning as a university student

6.3.3.1 Access to educational resources

This sub-theme addresses the aspect of social media as a platform for accessing educational materials and resources, particularly in the context of their university degrees or their specific academic subjects.

When it comes to finding educational resources, YouTube was frequently mentioned by the participants in this study. Not only did these participants report accessing lecture recordings on YouTube but also finding additional educational resources for their subject that were not provided within formal education. For example, a participant in group four praised YouTube tutorials throughout the discussion for helping to study her degree of physiotherapy, as in this quote below:

> *"I also use social media for like because like my course is quite practical based, like for us we don't really use like textbooks that much, so then us all like videos based so everyone can refresh things and class like physio is around the country will upload the videos of them doing certain techniques in so we will learn through, sounds really bad but we do we learn through social media definitely" (G in UKFG4).*

Her comments suggest that social media serves as a valuable resource for acquiring knowledge that may not be included in conventional methods of education, such as textbooks. This was particularly relevant in her practical-based course. Utilising platforms like YouTube allowed her to stay current and gain insights from fellow professionals regarding physiotherapy techniques.

For participants of other academic backgrounds, social media platforms were also found to be used in terms of helping the students to stay up to date in their field of study, obtaining information on their subjects. This was often presented in the data in relation to their subject area's accounts/pages on social media which enables them to engage in online conversations, as Zed in group one described:

> *"… there's a website called 'research gate' and you have different, individuals that have their own papers published and they talk about it, I think it's a form of social media, and you can learn quite a bit from those papers, and learn something new*

that's happening in certain field, in my case, medicine, which is always changing, definitely, the drugs and stuff."

Thus, it is evident that social media platforms provide these participants access to valuable educational resources.

6.3.3.2 Connecting and collaborating with others

Since social media was one of the main sources of communication between university students, many of them used it to seek for help from their peers. This was identified as helpful for their academic work in the university by many participants. During the focus group discussion, many participants from different groups mentioned that they liked to ask their friends or course mates for help, especially when they encountered difficulties while studying. For example: "*you can ask other people on your course what they think about something, it's like you can get like peer feedback that kind of thing"* (O in UKFG3*).* Or as another participant in group four said*: "… I mainly use it for my course group chat so I was like asking for help or like probably assignment but mainly exams, for like how did you answer this question?".* More specifically, the use of social media enabled them to collaborate and communicate with their peers when it came to group projects. For example, Zed in group one mentioned:

"*hmm so benefits, so I made with the help of my friends, like a presentation, to teach individuals, I think that's quite nice, quite helpful, can't think of anything else at this moment if I'm being very honest."*

In this manner, social media seemed to aid learning as it provided a platform for users to communicate with one another over academic tasks and get support from each other. Moreover, this peer support gained by using social media (in the form of Facebook group chat) was especially helpful for first year students, according to participants in group four.

In addition to this, social media use also enabled students to connect to online communities of people they did not know in real life. One participant talked about how she had found other people on social media (Facebook groups) while preparing for A-levels. As this is not the most relevant for them now (as a university student), it was not discussed further. In short, this sub-section/sub-theme highlights how social media can facilitate interactions and group work among students.

6.3.3.3 Interests-based learning

This sub-theme focuses on how students engage in self-directed learning related to their personal interests, using social media. It highlights the informal learning opportunities that social media provides, which is an important aspect of its role in education.

Many participants gave examples of using social media for learning depending on their personal needs and interests. Though not always acknowledged by the participants themselves as informal learning, it is evident that for them this type of learning is based on their personal interests and hobbies, such as the examples cited below:

> *G: Yeah so, I use social media to learn like how to do embroidery and some like crafts and I like watching cooking videos…(UKFG5)*
> *Y: Yeah (I use social media) for travel info and cooking hacks (UKFG3)*
> *M: Yeah, I would say like you can learn languages like German like Duolingo and other platforms like that which is really helpful. It really aids your learning (UKFG2).*

In addition to this, one participant's response in group two caught my attention during the analysis. See the excerpt below:

> *C: And yes I think...in the class it's make the class more convenient, and in our leisure time I can learning some other things like I watch the Sky news on the ITV to improve my listening and that's very helpful (UKFG2).*

In the context of this conversation, participant C (UKFG2) discussed how he could enhance his English listening skills while casually using social media, such as watching Sky News. It is worth noting that C is a Chinese international student, as he mentioned during the focus group discussion. This instance demonstrates how using social media can lead to unexpected learning advantages.

These learning practices, as shown in various quotes, are often self-directed and based on personal interests. Moreover, people use social media to discover information that aligns with their personal interests, even if it initially appears unrelated. Sometimes the participants found c themselves picking up random knowledge on social media, as one participant in group four commented:

> *"….is about picking up those random bits of knowledge that about all sorts of different stuff you can get from social media, then you can then use to either realise something interesting you want to look further or like using it for your studies I think both in and out the classroom is really good for that" (E in UKFG 4).*

Using social media involves discovering diverse pieces of information from various sources and on a wide range of topics. These pieces of knowledge may seem random at first but can be valuable. Students can then decide to delve deeper into these topics or use the acquired knowledge for their studies. In the context of interest-based learning, social media acts as a platform where individuals can pursue their passions and explore subjects they find intriguing, in turn contributing to their learning experiences.

6.3.3.4 Not a learning tool

This sub-theme addresses situations where participants did not consider social media as a suitable tool for learning.

Aside from the many examples of learning practices described by the participants as listed in previous sections, there were participants who believed that social media should not be used for learning or not a place that they would consider for learning. For example, Y in this group three said:

> *"… I don't really find it helpful for using social media like… if you just wanted to kill some time it's good you just go through social media see some funny stuff, yeah but for learning I don't think social media has any benefits on it because it's just for fun".*

This finding echoes the questionnaire findings where a small number of open-ended responses also elicited similar messages. D in group four used strong language in explaining why she would 'never' go on social media for her studies:

> *D: Well if it's like how often do I go on social media to study it would be always never but I never actually seek out information for my for, say hmm what I'm studying for…adding on to lecturer note I don't think I would ever go on social media to find info, I would like maybe go on to you know the portal or go to the library to find some journals etc., but I don't think I would ever go on twitter with this specific sort of finding info to like add to my stuff… (UKFG4).*

Social media clearly provides platforms where people can create, share and communicate with each other, which sometimes aid learning as well. However, for the participants who do not view social media as a learning tool, even if they may have experiences of finding useful information for their academic work on social media, they do not see social media as a place for learning. As D in group four said, she would never go on social media to study for her university subjects. Instead, she would go on academic sites or a physical library. Although

the majority of attitudes towards social media as a learning space were positive, it is important to explore further responses these more sceptical attitudes. Linking back to the open questions of the questionnaire, many respondents mentioned one of the challenges of using social media for learning as being the credibility or reliability of the information online: fake news, propaganda and misinformation tend to spread via social media. All of these examples highlight the problems associated with social media use and will be discussed in the next section.

6.3.4 Problems associated with social media use

6.3.4.1 Disinformation and Misinformation

In this sub-theme, I cover the findings in the focus group where participants address the reliability of information on social media. By 'disinformation' I refer to where participants explicitly addressed misleading information such as propaganda, as mentioned by some participants whereas 'misinformation' refers to incorrect or inaccurate information. Misinformation may not necessarily be spread with the intention to deceive or harm but also requires a certain ability to identify.

Although the focus group topic guide did not set example questions around misinformation on social media, all five group's participants discussed this issue to varying degrees.

Many participants expressed strong feelings about fake news on social media, although it may not seem directly linked to learning. In the excerpt below from group five, they were discussing their overall attitudes towards social media for learning. Meg mentioned fake news and then the others started a conversation around fake news:

> *M: I'd say that's helpful but then obviously I don't' know about you guys I wouldn't necessarily trust things on social media as much as I would on other things just because biases and stuff like that so…*
> *Meg: Like fake news as well*
> *M: Yeah*
> *I: Fake news is a big thing on social media I think it's like a couple weeks ago so was part of the Brexit kind of fake news thing where they were saying how foreign immigrants get 30,000 pounds benefits a year and pension like to get 6,000 pounds.. it's all like made up fake facts! Cause people worried about like oh we hate immigrants they would believe what was going on social media and they share like oh scumbags things like that so and then literally...I remember someone literally posted a link to the government literally said it fake news so why you still sharing why is it still going*

on…yeah so like social media and fake news is really quite a big topic and we really need be careful about what you reading is actually true or not.

This often leads to loss of trust about information on social media, even if it is from big news outlets such as the BBC, as discussed in same group:

N: I don't believe a word or anything that's on social media unless you found it like…on some like trusted source like ..if it's just on twitter even if it's BBC news, I don't really care it literally I just don't believe it, cause literally anyone can just make something then share it. If they are like verified still doesn't mean it's correct maybe it's just some random person putting up, it could be a picture from 10 years ago and then they put a caption like oh my god this is happening right now and then everyone shares it and everyone's omg like look at this but actually it happened 10 years ago it's like all they got to do is post it and say it's now and then everyone believes it, it's stupid!
I: yeah especially like the big ones like how people get vaccines and stuff like how much like stuff is posted like oh don't vaccine your child it would look like this…and I was like NO you are wrong! Just shut up just shut up! okay?(laugh)
G: it's frustrating even like with the whole vaccination thing he said he was wrong like…
(excerpt from UK5)

As we can see from the above, the participants felt very strongly about fake news on social media. In fact, this was common, especially when the participants were discussing fake news online. Therefore, I asked questions in relation to fake news in the post-discussion group interview. Below, participants from group three answered my question which was about how we can identify fake news:

D: There are some sort of tell-tale signs I guess that could be somewhat maybe just giving up a little bit of information to people about it, you know things that can be easily spotted, there are signs out there, there actually are, specifically tailored to deliver the fake news that is their purpose whereas the others are try and trick you.
The researcher: Examples?
O: There are like Daily match have you ever heard of that?
The researcher: no
O: And others, like my current county xxxx (county name), some weird neighbours just deliberately (spreading) satire news.. there's one like hmm news stamp? Which is political… bad fake political news you can sort of tell it's deliberately fake yeah.
(UKFG3, post discussion Q&A)

However, it was not clear how these participants could easily spot that this was fake news and deliberate attempts to deceive certain audiences (disinformation).

Additionally, since many of the participants were so aware of the issue, I asked them who they thought were vulnerable to fake news. Whilst they are confident with their own ability

to identify fake news, they were unanimous in the view that older people and young children are most likely to be affected by fake news.

Students seemed to be well aware of misinformation and disinformation on online, especially on social media. Some participants were therefore sceptical towards the information online. This could also be the reason why when it came to learning, they usually did not seek information on social media first, just as participant D in group three said: *"sometimes you can get caught up in a lot of fake news so hmm it's better to leave it outside the classroom".*

6.3.4.2 Potential harm

This sub-theme of potential harm covers the data where participants addressed the harmful aspects of social media use. This included privacy concerns and damage to mental health.

Tee in group one thought that the biggest concern with social media use was "*first of all lack of confidentiality or privacy but obviously it depends on how much the person posts".* Though she did not elaborate further, she could be referring to how social media companies deal with the users' personal information or to do with how much the social media user posts about their personal life, which could be seen as a concern for privacy.

One participant (pseudonym: I) in group five, pointed out that it was more difficult to have a private life when one's partner is a social media influencer who has a large number of followers:

> *" hmm I think they have their good side and their bad side like hmm knowing people who have become very successful on social media one of the thing, my boyfriend like he had over like 100k followers on his Instagram account which was nice for him, I think he really enjoyed it but at the same time I was like I don't wanna be part of that ..100k people looking at photos me and you feeling judged by them…I feel like if you keep the social circle on your social media quite small, it's a very nice way to keep in touch with people, but when it does gets to the point where you have so many people you don't know who they really are, you are a bit like I don't know who's judging me who's looking at the photos I don't wanna be part of it (UKFG5)".*

We can see from the above excerpts that it is evident she was uneasy about the possibility of people online passing judgment on her and her boyfriend's personal life. While her situation might not be representative of the other participants in the study, I found it intriguing because

it highlights how not only your own use of social media can compromise your privacy, but also those close to you can potentially jeopardize your private life.

In terms of harm to mental health, especially to young people (as highlighted by some participants), many participants in different groups addressed a wide range of issues. During the data analysis, the corresponding data were assigned with codes such as: 'encourages a comparative mindset'; 'distorted body image'; 'fake persona/reality'; 'encourages materialism' and so on. Among them, I picked out one conversation between the participants in group five as it contains many harmful aspects to mental health that I identified during the analysis:

> *G: Yeah I think like it has both good and bad sides to it, the good side is keep in contact with friends and family but then the bad side is like you waisted so much time on it and Instagram can be like really damaging to young ppl especially with like body image like you have those Instagram models… (I:it's not real!) exactly! they don't really look like that cause they trick young people that's how girls or boys should look like? But it's actually not natural ...cause they Photoshop to make themselves look like this thin and tiny. And then YouTube and Snapchat, it can also be quite damaging because people usually only post stuff which are like for fun bits of their lives so other people can watch it and just look at it like well my life is bit shit, it's not as fun as theirs…but then in reality you don't really know what's going behind the camera like ..they are just posting the good bits of their life.*
> *I: I think I wanna add to that as well it's like the way that social media use...like advertise things, so like oh everyone owns this, you know like really cool pair of Nike trainers I need to have that Nike pair of trainers and then you realize that oh that person could have literally bought that gonna wear this for the photos then return back to the shop because I know ppl that do that! and it's like you getting the bits of the message like oh you need to have this this this this to look cool to be like in.. but it's not true, half of them just fake ... I know people who've been like Photoshoping brands onto their cloths (laughs) just to make it look like oh I have a pair of Balenciaga trainers and oh look at this Givenchy jumper…and it's like …it's not even real it's just a made up project (laugh)how can you trick the world into believing…*
> *Meg: Yeah, I basically agree with that… there's always a toxic part of anything, in terms of social media and stuff and especially like young people's mental health and stuff like that... because they have like the expectation like everybody has a wonderful life so they know they can't be that because everyone has good days and bad days.*
> (UKFG5)

This discussion highlights many issues with social media use in relation to mental health, as the most representative among the focus group data. It demonstrates that the participants are conscious of these problems associated with using social media. For instance, G and Meg

recognised that individuals typically share the positive aspects of their lives on social media, even though in reality, everyone experiences both good and bad days.

6.3.4.3 Distractive and disruptive nature

This sub-theme explores how social media can act as a distraction and disrupt the participants' attention span, daily routines and academic work. Earlier in the section 6.3.2.1, based on the narratives shared by the participants, it emerged how students readily engage with social media without being mindful of the passing of time. For example, Meg in group five said that:

> *"Yeah, I do the same, a couple of hours scrolling and (laughs) then you realised the time you spent on twitter you were like OMG I spent two hours on twitter (laughs)".*

Meg's encounters with using social media were typical among this study's participants. They frequently discovered themselves involved in aimless surfing and scrolling through social media platforms. As a result, social media use was seen as distractive and disruptive. As M in group two commented, "…*and it's really distracting that's why I spent a lot of my time on it. Like in the morning when I could been doing other stuff".*

Though scrolling on social media could be considered a pastime, especially when you are free, as O in group three explained:

> *" It depends what you were doing, if you were doing something, for example if you are like studying then it's a distraction but if you got free time then I guess it's not".*

However, social media proved to be a significant source of distraction for participants when they had other obligations, particularly academic work. This became apparent during the focus group conversation as the participants in various groups consistently brought up social media as a distraction, such as: getting distracted by the notifications while studying; spending too much time chatting to friends whilst they should have been focus on doing their university work; and many more.

Moreover, the distraction not only came from social media itself, as in when the students should have been engaged in other tasks rather than getting distracted by social media and using social media instead. The distraction also occurred when students utilised social media for educational purposes. For example, some participants in group four mentioned that they

started using social media with the intention of looking up information but ended up getting 'carried away' by it:

> *O: Sometimes it could be helpful if you actually looking for information but then like, I think, sometimes if you like you gonna search something on Twitter but then you get carried away by something else you see!*
> *D: yeah!*
> *O: and you look deeper towards that…(you get carried away).*
>
> *(Excerpt from UKFG4)*

On the other hand, some participants addressed the potential reasons behind why we tend to get distracted by social media. G, a participant in group three, expressed her views on why we tend to get distracted:

> *" I think the problem is… because the academia is so digitalised now you got social media that kind of always beside you when you trynna study that's a distraction rather than you would just going back on books and stuff things we're not doing it much this year cause you know you can differentiate things easier".*

In her opinion, the problem lies in heavy reliance on digital tools and social media is always right there. This makes it distracting compared to the old days when one mostly used physical books.

In addition to this, whether one is distracted by social media also depends on self-control, according to some participants such as I in group five:

> *"Depends how much you control yourself, if you just going on your phone you check, check, check, you are not gonna getting your work done but like if communicate with people or like meet up in the library to do some studies, use social media to get people to do that then it can be quite beneficial".*

6.4 Chapter summary

The findings that emerged from the UK site showcased a wide range of topics surrounded by social media use and learning in the higher education context. The qualitative data collected through focus groups share many similarities with the data collected via the questionnaire, especially the qualitative data from the open-ended questions. In this sense, the qualitative data can be seen as an expansion of the quantitative data. In this last section of the chapter, I combine and compare the relevant qualitative and quantitative data to respond to the

research questions. These are initial answers to the research questions purely based on the interpretation of the relevant findings. A deeper analysis is provided in the next chapter.

6.4.1 RQ1-How do university students in the UK use social media in the network society?

The statistical findings suggest that the majority of UK university students use social media frequently with many reporting that they used multiple social media platforms for various reasons. This was further elaborated in the qualitative findings of this study, especially from the focus groups: UK university students were found to use social media frequently (which matches with the quantitative finding); they reported using a wide range of social media platforms (which also matches with the quantitative finding) for different purposes. However, in the focus groups, the participants were able to elaborate on their usage in more detail. Therefore, their social media preferences were also addressed additionally in the qualitative data. The qualitative data further showed that these participants were using social media for communications and social networking in the university, as discussed in 6.3.2.2. In short, UK university students were found to use social media frequently and tended to spend a considerable amount of time on social media on a daily basis. This is likely because they used social media for multiple reasons, not only for entertainment but also for communications and social networking in the university.

The findings from both the questionnaire and focus groups reveal that majority of UK university students in this study use social media. However, their social media practices are marked by unsureness. From the questionnaire results, we can see that the sample, composed predominantly of young female undergraduates, reported high levels of internet access and daily engagement with multiple social media platforms. Most participants described using social media primarily for browsing, information-seeking, and communication purposes. Whilst a smaller number of people engaged in content creation.

Moreover, UK participants' understandings about the definition of social media are similar to their Chinese counterparts in terms of viewing it as a broad concept. In particular, UK participants described social media as a broad concept that not only enables connection and communication with others but also provides a space to present themselves, and even self-promotion (i.e. showing off wealth)—features that were not mentioned by the Chinese

participants. This emphasis on self-expression aligns Wellman's networked individualism, which highlights how individuals use digital networks to construct and perform personal identities while maintaining multiple weak and strong ties. For UK students, social media was not simply a functional tool for information or learning but also a platform for managing visibility and status within their networks. This suggests that their practices extend beyond academic purposes, reflecting the broader cultural role of social media in shaping identity and belonging in the network society (Castells, 2010).

6.4.2 RQ2-What is the role of social media in UK university students' formal, informal and non-formal learning?

In section 6.2.4.2 I presented the findings based on the questionnaire respondents' list of examples of using social media for learning. Based on these findings, it emerged that the role of social media in learning mainly lies in how it is used for receiving information, personal interests and communication. Focus group findings in terms of the role of social media in learning can be seen as an expansion to the previous findings from the questionnaire. Qualitative findings based on the questionnaire and focus group both revealed that some participants did not think social media was a suitable learning tool and the reasons for this were elaborated further in section 6.3.3.4. In short, social media's role in learning as a university student is multi-faceted. For university students that recognise the value of social in their learning, it provides access to educational resources and allows them to connect and collaborate with other people such as their peers. Social media platforms are also a place for learning based on personal interests and hobbies, though initially the learning element may not be so apparent. What worth pointing out a few questionnaire respondents expressed explicitly that they do not use social media for learning, they view it more like an entertainment. These patterns reflect broader national and international trends in student digital practice, especially a recent study by Walker, Jenkins, & Voce (2023) suggest where social media is an integral part of daily life but not uniformly embraced as a learning tool.

Moreover, the qualitative findings emerged from the focus group also echoed this finding from questionnaire. A striking feature of the focus group findings was UK students' "mixed

feelings" about the relationship between social media and learning. On one hand, they recognised that platforms provide abundant resources, quick access to information, and opportunities for peer support through communications on social media platforms. Some people explicitly reported using social media for academic purposes, including sharing study materials or seeking help from course mates. On the other hand, students expressed doubts about the reliability of online information and frustration at the distractions associated with constant connectivity. In addition to this, some students in the focus group articulated uncertainty about what counted as "learning" through social media—whether informal peer discussion, collaborative work in WhatsApp groups, or following subject-specific pages could count as learning. At the same time, some students highlighted the absence of social media from formal classroom spaces, noting that it was rarely integrated into formal teaching. This separation between formal learning and social media use illustrates the uneven integration of digital technologies into higher education, a dynamic consistent with Castells' (2010) conception of the network society. While students actively engage in informal and peer-supported learning through networked platforms such as Facebook groups—reflecting Wellman's (2012) notion of networked individualism—they remain uncertain about the legitimacy of such practices within institutional contexts. Moreover, from a connectivist perspective (Siemens, 2005), this gap highlights a tension between students' distributed learning practices and universities' reliance on traditional forms of knowledge validation.

More importantly, as this study was conducted prior to Covid-19, the findings should be considered in the context of post-pandemic era. One recent study in the UK highlight that students expect digital tools to provide flexibility and connectivity, but they also report concerns about distraction, isolation, and belonging in blended environments (Syska & Pritchard, 2023). The ambivalence expressed by participants in this study appears similar to the ones in the post-pandemic world: even before Covid-19, students were already contending with the dual nature of social media as both a resource and a distraction. Post-pandemic evidence suggests that these tensions remain salient, with universities now attempting to strike a balance between flexibility and community engagement (Walker et al., 2023).

6.4.3 RQ3-What are the factors that impact UK university students' use of social media for learning?

Although the quantitative data in the UK study did not directly identify factors shaping students' use of social media for learning, the qualitative findings provide important insights into the influences at play. These factors can be summarised into three broad areas: first, students' perceptions and attitudes towards social media and the institutional and cultural context in which learning occurs.

Firstly, students' perceptions and attitudes played a central role on their social media practices. The findings revealed many UK students have mixed feelings towards social media: on one hand, students acknowledged the accessibility, convenience, and abundance of resources that social media provides; on the other hand, they were aware of its distracting potential and harm of misinformation. Moreover, a few people reported treating social media as an entertainment tool therefore rejected the idea of its potential for learning. Thus, the decision to use social media for learning is shaped not simply by availability, but by students' perceptions of social media and their confidence in distinguishing between beneficial and detrimental uses.

In addition, a number of institutional and cultural factors shaped perceptions of legitimacy of social media use for learning. As mentions in previous section, several students highlighted the absence of social media from formal classroom spaces, noting that it was rarely integrated into formal HE teaching. The absence of social media in formal university teaching may explain UK students' uncertainties about its value as a legitimate learning resource. Using the perspective of the network society (Castells, 2010), this also reflects the uneven integration of digital infrastructures into higher education: while students are embedded in digital networks, universities remain cautious in adopting social media pedagogically. Recent post-pandemic research suggests this tension persists. For example, Syska and Pritchard (2023) found that students in blended learning contexts valued flexibility but questioned whether digital platforms adequately fostered academic belonging and credibility.

Overall, the factors influencing UK students' use of social media for learning are complex. They are not determined by technology alone but by a combination of personal attitudes, platform affordances, and institutional recognition. Unless HE institutions actively legitimise and support the use of social media for learning, students may continue to view it as marginal—useful for communication and exploration, but not fully reliable for their formal learning.

Chapter7. Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This research explores how university students in China and the UK use social media for their formal, non-formal, and informal learning within the contemporary network society. In order to achieve this, I firstly examined the educational and technological contexts of both countries in Chapter 2. Then, in Chapter 3, I reviewed the relevant literature and discussed existing research in three broad areas: learning theories and media theories, higher education research and social media research. Particularly, I proposed to use the concepts of formal, informal and non-formal learning, connectivism, network society and networked individualism as the theoretical framework for this study. I also noted that this thesis embraces a broad concept of social media that is not limited to mainstream social media platforms but rather, is dependent on the participants' own understanding of social media. The findings of the research were presented in two separate chapters (Chapters 5 and 6), each focusing on the results obtained from data collected in each country.

Before moving on the main discussion of this thesis, I would like to clarity the definition of social media in this study. In the introduction chapter (see sec.1.2), I have given a working definition of social media as a collection of digitally networked platforms that enable users to interact with both content and one another. Later, in the literature review (see sec.3.4.1) I have discussed various definitions can be found in the literature which led the decision to let the participants in this study illustrate what they think social media is. Findings on the definitions of social media from university in China and UK have suggested that these students view social media as a broad concept, they agree that any platform, as long as it allows people to communicate can be seen as social media. Meanwhile, they are also confused about the clear criteria for what counts as social media, as evidenced in the focus group findings in which students in both countries asking others if certain platform is considered as social media. Based on the understanding of the participants and existing literature, I developed my own definition of social media as the following: social media can be loosely defined as a collection of constantly evolving digitally networked platforms that enable users to interact with other users through activities such as (but not limited to) online communications, content creating

and sharing. Additionally, due to its constantly evolving nature, it should not be limited to certain popular platforms.

The current chapter discusses the key themes raised by the findings emerged from both research sites. Three overarching themes for this chapter are: formal, informal and non-formal learning as a continuum with the use of social media; understanding learning on social media; the role of social media in shaping student experiences of higher education. These three key themes are derived from my interpretation of the findings and based on the literature that I reviewed in this field.

7.2 Formal, informal and non-formal learning as a continuum with the use of social media

7.2.1 Formal, informal and non-formal learning in this study

The learning aspect in this study was examined using concepts of formal, informal and non-formal learning. As outlined in the literature review, the terms formal, informal and non-formal learning are subjects of dispute, with ongoing discussions concerning their definitions and whether it is appropriate to categorise learning into distinct classifications. Whilst acknowledging these issues, I used UNESCO (2009) definitions of formal, informal and non-formal learning as a guide to describe the learning events and practices that appeared in my findings. As a reminder, the definitions of these three types of learning used in this study are cited below:

> *Formal learning occurs as a result of experiences in an education or training institution, with structured learning objectives, learning time and support which leads to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.*
>
> *Non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.*
>
> *Informal learning results from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (UNESCO,2009, P27)*

Using the above definitions as a guide, I explain the different forms of learning as they appear in this study, in the following paragraphs.

I consider formal learning as what these university students are likely to experience when they are “attending university”. When I refer to "attending university," I am specifically referring to their participation in structured (adhere to a curriculum or syllabus) learning events and practices, organised by the educational institution's instructors. These activities are crucial for students as they contribute to their university degree accreditation. These learning events and practices can take place within the confines of a physical classroom or beyond it, either in-person or online, and the learners are conscious of their participation. In this sense, a prime example of formal learning in this study would be when university students participate in lectures, irrespective of whether these lectures are conducted in-person or through online platforms. This is because lectures typically adhere to a predefined syllabus and are an integral part of the formal curriculum, led by an instructor, such as a teacher or lecturer. This structured approach ensures that the learning process is consistent and guided, contributing to the overall formal education of the students.

On the other hand, non-formal learning bears certain resemblances to formal learning in that it also encompasses structured educational experiences. However, the primary distinction, in my opinion, between formal and non-formal learning lies in the fact that non-formal learning does not necessarily have to be delivered by an educational institution or result in formal certification. Again, based on the findings in my data, one example of non-formal learning in this study, as reported by the participants, could involve Chinese students enrolling in online courses like the English language proficiency exams. According to the accounts provided by the participants regarding their experiences with these online courses, they possess a structured format, with clear learning objectives and a progressive curriculum from one class to another. Nevertheless, these courses are typically offered by external tutoring services rather than being integrated into the official university curriculum. Attending these courses is usually on a voluntary basis (as the university does not consider whether or not students’ external tutoring courses as part of the requirements of obtaining their degree, though it is likely to help with students’ academic performance in the university). Therefore, I view such learning events as non-formal learning.

Lastly, informal learning primarily takes the form of unstructured learning across a diverse range of subjects, driven by the participants' personal interests and preferences. The use of social media platforms plays a significant role in facilitating this informal learning process, as

the data shows many examples of informal learning on various social media platforms. For example, UK participants reported that they were finding videos on YouTube that related to the subjects they were currently studying while Chinese participants followed accounts on Xiaohongshu to learn make-up skills. In addition, these informal learning events/practices can be intentional or unintentional, as the UNESCO (2009) definition states. However, as the participants in this study were asked to recall their experiences of learning on social media during the data collection process, it is impossible to further categorise their informal learning as intentional or unintentional. Since learners might not be fully aware, they might not discuss it during the data collection process. Alternatively, they might not have been conscious of engaging in 'informal learning' until prompted during data collection. Therefore, I did not consider the learners' awareness as a criterion for identifying informal learning practices in this study.

7.2.2 The role of social media in blurring the boundaries of different forms of learning

Having discussed some examples that appeared in this study that could be as considered as formal, informal and non-formal learning, I will now examine relationships among these different forms of learning with the use of social media. According to Malcolm et al. (2003), it is impossible to define distinct ideal types of formal and informal learning due to their interconnected nature. The findings in this study also suggest that is no clear-cut boundary between formal, informal and non-formal learning; these are reflected in the formal, informal and non-formal learning examples discussed in the findings.

To be more specific, participants in this study could engage in subjects/content that related to their formal learning while doing informal learning. The most frequently mentioned example for the participants in China is English (vocabulary) learning on their phone through various apps. This could potentially be viewed as informal learning according to the UNESCO (2009) definition, as it is mostly likely unstructured, and the learners are just learning on-the-go. As Xu in Chinese focus group one mentioned, such learning could even occur when he was using the bathroom, and he memorised a few English words. However, the reason why it is common for participants in China to learn English, also needs to be considered: it is likely because they have to pass major English exams such as CET4 during their university study (see Chapter 2 and relevant participants accounts see 5.2.4). The passing of these exams is strongly

related to the awarding of their undergraduate degree as well as future career prospects. Therefore, it is not surprising to see these students using various apps and online platforms to study subjects that are required in their formal education, in their informal learning. Similar examples can be found in the UK study as well. For example, when asked about their experiences of using social media for learning during the survey, one respondent stated that he/she used social media to learn more about the lecture topic. Sometimes, these informal learning practices with the use of social media can become more structured, in turn making it more look like non-formal learning. Lin in the Chinese focus group one mentioned that she "clocks in" to learn English every day, following her teacher's recommendations. For her, this informal learning on English learning apps became more structured as she had a clear objective and learnt it every day. Whilst similar English vocabulary memorisation activities are mainly regarded as informal learning in this study, Lin's experiences could also be seen as non-formal learning. Secondly, just as informal learning identified in this study was influenced by formal learning needs, non-formal learning of the participants in this study are also affected by their formal learning. This point emerges when the Chinese focus group participants were talking about their experiences with extra-curriculum online courses ranging from English, Chinese language and so on. These courses are usually paid courses provided by external educational agencies and meet the criteria of 'non-formal learning' according to the UNESCO (2009) definition. However, the subjects are also tightly related to their university degree, which is formal learning. Thirdly, what these students have learnt in non-formal and informal learning also impacts their formal learning experiences in the university. In the Chinese focus group one, there was a moment when the participants commented on the teaching quality of their university teachers in comparison with the tutors on the courses they attended online. This experience in turn influenced his opinions regarding the formal learning he received in the university.

Rogers (2014) argued that learning should be viewed as a continuum which blends formal, informal and non-formal learning together. This idea suggests that learning is a continuous sequence or progression of related elements that gradually change or blend into one another. Thus, there are no clear and distinct boundaries between formal, informal and non-formal learning but instead, they flow smoothly from one point to another. My findings show that all

formal, informal and non-formal learning interact and influence each other, thus supporting Rogers' (2014) view.

The findings in both China and UK study have many examples of the participants utilise social media crossing the boundaries of formal, informal and non-formal learning. Thus, I propose the idea that social media plays a role in blurring the boundaries between formal and informal learning and contributing to blend these forms of learning into a continuum. This perspective echoes Greenhow and Lewin's (2016) view of social media as having the potential to connect formal and informal learning, as well as Dabbagh and Kitsantas' (2012) statement about social media being a natural formula to intergrade formal and informal learning.

More recently, there is a pressing need to understand the intricate connections and relationships between the knowledge acquired within formal university settings and the continuous learning that occurs beyond the confines of the classroom, supported by digital technologies. Certain researchers do not focus extensively on the separation between formal and informal learning, instead adopting a "Learning Ecology" paradigm to investigate the complexities across diverse contexts in lifelong learning processes (Elmehairy, 2021; Peters et al., 2021; Peters & Romero, 2019). The concept of learning ecology has been promoted to grasp the nuances of learning in relation to the opportunities presented by advancements in technology and within various settings. While this study did not utilise the Learning Ecology model, the outcomes also indicate that students effectively used social media to facilitate their learning across a diverse array of contexts. This underscores the proposition that the distinctions between formal, informal, and non-formal learning are blurred, suggesting that they should instead be perceived as interconnected components within a continuum.

7.3 Understanding learning on social media

This section examines the learning occurred on social media based on the findings in relation to theories of connectivism and network society. In the literature review chapter, I introduced the principles of connectivism (Siemens, 2005a), one of the principles clearly states that learning may exist in non-human interactions, which offers a useful foundation for recognising the learning happened on social media. Meanwhile, Castell's network society (2010) also helps me explain why communication and interactions happened on social media was found helpful for students learning in this study. In the following sub-sections, these

social media practices from the findings are examined in greater detail with empirical studies and existing research.

7.3.1 Forming learning networks and peer support groups

Siemens (2005a, p. 7) has outlined that "learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions" among the eight principles of connectivism. Within the scope of this principle, social media platforms serve as an ideal fertile ground for both learning and knowledge acquisition. Social media platforms can provide a rich environment for encountering a variety of viewpoints, experiences and knowledge. Therefore, it is not surprising to see a considerable number of Chinese questionnaire respondents highlighting the abundance of valuable resources as a notable advantage of using social media for learning, as elaborated upon in Chapter 5. Moreover, social media allows its users to engage with content from different cultures, disciplines and backgrounds, enhancing their understanding of various subjects. This can be found in the qualitative data gathered from the English questionnaire where students described how they learnt from various opinions from the comments and accounts they follow on social media.

Since exposure to diverse opinions found on social media can be viewed as learning in the perspective of Connectivism. More importantly, social media helps to form learning networks and peer support groups. Siemens (2007, p. 55) states that "Learning occurs through creation of networks with people and information sources mediated and enhanced by technology". A connectivist view of learning is not just about acquiring knowledge but also about building a network of nodes and connections that can be accessed when needed. A network in connectivism has at least two elements: nodes and connections (Siemens, 2005b). Social media enables its users to create vast networks of information sources (nodes) and individuals can access these nodes when needed (connections). On social media, learners can follow experts, join groups, and interact with people from all walks of life who share valuable insights and information. Under the perspectives of connectivism, these networks connections on social media platforms can be seen as resources for learning.

In the two findings chapters (chapters 5,6), I addressed how the university students in this study used social media for learning purposes. Both results from the open-ended questions and focus groups generated many examples of students utilising social media platforms to

build their networks of learning. Some examples include creating an educational twitter account and following educational sources that may be suitable for the degree (UK); following make up, nail artist accounts on Xiaohongshu (China); joining Facebook groups of people who have the same interests (UK); the driving exams app where users share exam information (China). By actively following informational social media accounts/pages, the examples from the findings above show how students consciously expand their learning network, connecting with diverse sources of information, and embracing the idea that knowledge is distributed across this network. Empirical research also supports this perspective: for example, Zhu and Procter (2015) found that UK PhD students and early career researchers used social media platforms such as Twitter, blogs, and Facebook to build professional networks, publicise their work, and gain feedback and support from peers. Although they also reported challenges such as time- consuming nature of social media use and risks of idea theft, the study illustrates how social media can be leveraged to create personal learning networks.

7.3.2 Learning through communications and interactions

Previously, I established how learning occurs on social media platforms through the lens of connectivism, and how learning and knowledge exist in the diversity of opinions supported by social media use. Connectivism advocates that learning is an active process involving interaction and engagement, in which individuals build and cross networks. Social media facilitates such communication and interaction through comments, discussions, sharing, and collaboration. Participants in this study described engaging in various forms of communication on social media platforms in both China and UK. Not only with their real-life peers but also with wider online communities.

The findings from both show that students' learning frequently occurred through communication with peers in WhatsApp/Facebook (UK) and WeChat/QQ (China) groups. These interactions illustrate how learning is embedded in the flows of everyday life in the network society as a university student, rather than only in formal HE classroom settings. Students described how quick exchanges with classmates, and even in-between moments of commuting to different classrooms contributed to their learning. This resonates with Castells' (2010) notion of timeless time, in which digital connectivity compresses and reshapes temporal patterns, enabling learning to take place continuously rather than at fixed times.

Moreover, the findings from China and UK also suggest that social media collapses boundaries between social, personal, and academic domains of these students. Conversations in Facebook groups (in the UK), for example, often moved fluidly arranging social events and clarifying course content. In China, WeChat was found to serve not only as a tool for staying in contact with family but also as a channel for university-related communications. This disrupt in different domains of university students academic, social and prosomal life reflects Castells' argument that in the network society, distinctions between spheres of life are increasingly porous, as digital infrastructures integrate communication across domains. This may also explain the over-use and strong dependency of social media of these students reported in the findings.

Meanwhile, the findings in the China study add detail to Castells' idea by showing that global flows of interactions are shaped by local cultures and restrictions. For example, the findings from the Chinese site reported students using locally popular social media apps/platforms for English language learning under mandatory exam pressures. This contrasts sharply with the UK study, where such high level of exam-driven usage was absent. In fact, one common critique of Castell's network society is that the theory tends to adopt an extreme stance--giving primacy to information and communication technologies as drivers of social change while underplay attention to cultural, political, and historical contexts (van Dijk, 2020). Critics also note that the framework is macro-oriented, often overlooking the role of individual agency and micro-level social practices in shaping how networks function in everyday life (Couldry, 2012). Therefore, in section 7.4 I discuss student's social media use from a more personal perspective.

7.3.3 Information filtering and evaluation

Connectivism stresses that decision-making itself is a learning process (Siemens, 2005a). This process of decision-making involves selecting what to learn from the available information and recognising that perceptions of reality can evolve over time. In the context of social media usage, the users need to learn to discern reliable information from misinformation and develop skills to assess the credibility of posts and sources. The ability to filter, evaluate and validate information is particularly valued by study participants in the UK as the data contains their discussion about the problems associated with social media use (see sec.6.3.4). On the

other hand, the results from the Chinese site did not explicitly align with the connectivism principle of filtering and evaluating information, as the participants did not engage in discussions directly related to this concept. Nonetheless, their choice of social media platforms for their learning purposes indirectly reflects the idea of information filtering within the connectivist framework (such as choosing to learn English from well-established platforms in this area such as Hujiang and Himalayas).

In section 2.4.2 social media usage in the UK, I briefly mentioned about concerns over the potential harm generated by social media. In the UK study, participants shared how they went about identifying fake news and misinformation generated by some tabloids; participants talked about the political propaganda on social media as trying to "brainwash" people; indeed, some participants shied away from using social media for learning because they could not be sure that the sources were reliable; participants were also aware that people created fake persona on social media (for participants accounts for these examples, see sec.6.2.4.4, sec 6.3.4.1 and sec.6.3.4.2). These issues often led to the students viewing social media as unhelpful for learning. In other words, not trustworthy. In the connectivist view of learning, however, their decision-making around and evaluating of this information on social media, filtering out untrue information, in itself indicates learning.

In the UK context, reports have indicated high levels of awareness and concern regarding the potential harm of social media (i.e., Ofcom, 2021b). The participants in the UK study were equipped with the ability to critically evaluate information sources. However, it is not clear from the findings of this study where these participants obtained such skills from. This might relate to their exposure to social media from a young age, as reported in the focus group findings (see sec.6.3.2.1). This may be due to the differences in critical thinking between UK and Chinese students. As the findings from the Chinese site that one participant says his teacher encourages them utilise online materials for English learning. This echoed with Xu and Hu (2020) study that the Chinese culture also plays a role in how doctoral students respond to their supervisors' feedback as one participant in their study says "All I learned in my past education in China is to respect and listen to the teachers. They are not supposed to be challenged and questioned" (p.728). However, Fan and See's (2022) systematic review presents a more complex picture: rather than lacking critical thinking ability, Chinese students may simply be less disposed toward certain forms of critical engagement, suggesting that

cultural norms influence how critical thinking is expressed rather than its absence. Together, these insights suggest that cultural orientations towards authority and deference to teachers shape how Chinese students engage with digital resources, in contrast to the stronger emphasis on independent critical evaluation often expected in UK higher education.

7.4 The role of social media in shaping students' experiences of higher education.

During the data collection in China and the UK, both questionnaire respondents and focus group participants touched upon a wide range of online platforms, apps, and websites and even digital devices. Participants in this study mentioned examples from instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp and WeChat to learning management systems such as Blackboard and online course platform Zhidao. Some of the platforms (such as Blackboard) the participants mentioned may not be seen as social media or be considered as digital technologies in other studies (i.e. Henderson et al. 2015). However, in this thesis, a broad concept of social media is adopted by allowing the participants to define their own perceptions of social media, without imposing a specific definition or intervening in the students' discussions during the data collection phase. Thus, under the umbrella term of social media, this section includes all sorts of digital tools and platforms that appeared in the data.

7.4.1 Supporting teaching & learning activities in HE

Based on the questionnaire results of this research, it is evident that most of the participants in both countries possess adequate digital devices like smartphones and laptops, and they reside in areas that have access to the internet such as Wi-Fi or Ethernet. Meanwhile, their HE institutions incorporate platforms like Blackboard and Zhidao to assist their teaching and learning activities. This finding echoes Henderson et al.'s (2015) study on 1658 Australian undergraduate students which found that digital technologies are a crucial part of their university studies. However, the same study also revealed that the use of digital technologies is not transforming their university experiences as the most prominent digital practices by these students related to mundane uses such as the logistics of university study and less commonly for direct learning (Henderson et al., 2017). This may explain the hesitation of some participants in the focus group in mentioning using the university's library website to access the learning management website of their university, in order to see lecture handouts,

as an example of learning on social media. Although the participants in this study may not perceive such usage as directly related to learning, I would contend that these social media platforms (primarily digital tools adopted by the university) facilitate the administration and coordination of teaching and learning processes, similar to the "logistics of learning" in Henderson et al.'s (2015) study. While the distinctions may not be immediately evident in terms of learning outcomes, they play a supportive role in ensuring the smooth operation of these activities.

7.4.2 A "must have" for social interactions in HE

Social media communications are widely used in both China and UK in the contexts of this study. University students in China were reported relying on social media platforms such as QQ and WeChat for communications between the school and students, especially the group chat function. The UK counterparts incorporate email for more formal communication from the school and Facebook (pages and group chats) for less formal communications such as society updates, social events and peer communications. In particular, university students in the UK emphasised the necessity of having access to social media as a university student. Many participants in the UK mentioned how social events were all posted on Facebook. Before coming to the university, some of them may not even have used these specific social media platforms, such Facebook. The fact that social media is tied up with all kinds of social interactions in the university context can be frustrating to some. If one doesn't use social media, one is likely to experience the fear of missing out (FOMO). As G (UKFG4) commented, "*I think in the university context, for me like the kind of the frustrating thing is like if you are not on like anything you can miss so much".* In a university environment, students who are not active on social media may miss out on important announcements, events, news and opportunities shared through these channels.

7.4.3 Challenging the "hierarchical structure" in HE

My findings also indicate that students' utilisation of social media has the capacity to challenge the established hierarchical dynamics within the context of higher education.

First of all, the role of the teacher as the authority and knowledge dispenser is being challenged by the use of social media. With access to the information and educational

resources provided by social media, students have more ownership and control over their learning experiences. This is particularly evident in the Chinese study. Traditionally, the teachers in China have been the authority figures in the classroom and students were expected to follow their teachers' orders, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, Chan (2018) found that students placed relatively low importance on teachers as role models, which indicates a shift from traditional Chinese values. Similarly, the focus group participants in China (especially groups one and five) no longer wished just to listen to their teachers; instead, they took ownership of deciding how and what they wanted to learn. This was empowered by the use of social media. In section 3.3.2.2 where I addressed the student perspective on the purpose of HE, Lai et al. (2012) found that Chinese university students prioritised the functional aspects of HE as in how they can have better career choices after obtaining a HE degree. In chapter two, I explained students in China have to pass various compulsory exams, including those related to their specific subject modules and other major examinations such as CET4. The learning resources available on social media directly address the students' needs and offer tailored programmes and courses for individuals to choose from. Furthermore, when students find the instruction from their teachers unsatisfactory, social media provides them with a wealth of learning resources for them to choose. These learning resources cater to their learning needs, which in turn reduce the prominence of the teacher's role. As focus group data shows that Xu (CNFG1) no longer feels the need to rush to the teacher's office to ask questions about the class just finished. This shift illustrates how the traditional hierarchy between teachers and students is being reconfigured in the network society (Castells, 2010), where access to digital infrastructures allows learners to bypass institutional gatekeepers and construct their own knowledge pathways. In this environment, traditional power relations between teacher and student are increasingly challenged: as students rely less on the exclusive expertise of teachers and more on the dynamic, distributed networks of information available through social media.

In addition to this, despite the presence of phone banning policies in certain classrooms in China, students have devised proactive strategies to bypass these rules, such as carrying two phones, submitting one to the collection pouch while retaining the other. This behaviour reflects the essence of networked individualism (Wellman, 2001), where individuals prioritise constant access to their personalised networks and learning resources, even in the face of

institutional constraints. At the same time, this resistance highlights the tensions between institutional authority and student autonomy in the network society (Castells, 2010). While universities attempt to regulate device use to preserve traditional modes of classroom interaction, students operate in a broader digital environment where connectivity is taken for granted and considered essential. The act of phone bans therefore not only illustrates personal strategies of adaptation but also symbolises the clash between hierarchical educational structures and the decentralised, networked logics of contemporary student life.

These findings indicate that teacher–student power relations in China are undergoing change as students gain access to a wider range of digital resources. Traditionally, the teacher has been positioned as the central source of knowledge, but the participatory affordances of online platforms enable students to supplement, and sometimes challenge, classroom authority. This dynamic can be understood through the lens of networked individualism (Wellman, 2001), where learners construct their own networks of knowledge and authority, and through the network society (Castells, 2010), which highlights how connectivity redistributes power. Recent studies also evidenced this, for example, my findings align with Veletsianos' (2020) observation that social media tends towards breaking down hierarchical structures within the higher education classroom, where traditionally the teacher holds the exclusive authoritative role. Through the utilisation of social media, students no longer solely depend on their teachers for knowledge dissemination. They can independently seek the information they require online. This is likely to challenge the long-standing hierarchy of the student-teacher relationships (teacher's role), especially in the Chinese context. This evolution reflects a broader transformation in higher education where hierarchical structures are moderated by digital access, reshaping authority and learning relationships.

The challenge to the HE hierarchy is less prominent in the UK study comparing to the Chinese study. However, the hierarchy is not just reflected in the teacher's roles or teacher-student relationships but between different HE institutions, especially when some well-funded universities have better resources. Social media helps to reduce this hierarchy by providing access to its users. For example, in the case of G (in the UKFG4), a physiotherapy student, though she was registered in this university, YouTube gives her access to other learning resources from other universities or professionals across the nation. In social media learning, students have the freedom to access high-quality educational content from a wide range of

sources, potentially challenging the notion that one institution holds a monopoly on knowledge and expertise.

7.5 Chapter summary

In this discussion chapter, I have drawn on the findings from two research sites, using the literature that I reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3 and empirical research to make sense of these findings. This synthesis has led me to identify three major themes that serve as the foundation for structuring this chapter.

The initial theme revolves around the interrelationships among formal, informal and non-formal learning, as manifested in this study. Drawing guidance from UNESCO's (2009) definitions of these learning types, I have pinpointed specific examples within my data that could be viewed as formal, informal or non-formal learning. Yet, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that there are no distinct boundaries between these learning types. This finding aligns with the perspectives of many researchers and scholars, as elaborated upon in this chapter. Furthermore, I have argued that social media has the role of blending different forms of learning together. I further extend the discussion by referring to researchers who use the concept of "learning ecology" to address the intricate nature of learning in the digital sphere.

The second theme is rooted in the connectivist viewpoint of learning while using elements from network society to analyse students learning occurred on social media. Through which I have analysed the data pertaining to the utilisation of social media for learning purposes. My analysis reveals that the participants in this study have exhibited learning practices aligned with the principles of connectivism. I have expounded upon relevant examples in a comprehensive manner.

Lastly, this study participants have demonstrated engagement with diverse forms of social media during their university studies. It should be noted that the term 'social media' is based on the participants' understandings. Social media use has in turn shaped their higher education experiences in three distinct ways. Firstly, by supporting teaching and learning activities within the context of higher education; secondly, by acting as a necessary conduit

for social interactions in the university; and thirdly, by challenging the established hierarchical structures inherent to higher education.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

As the final chapter of this thesis, it has three main purposes: first, to summarise how the current research addressed the research questions; second, to highlight the original contributions of the study in terms of theoretical, empirical practical aspect; third, to outline limitations and propose future research directions.

8.1 Key findings

8.1.1 Dynamic interplay between the local and the institutional within the network society

The first research question of "How do university students in China and the UK use social media in the network society?" led me to examine the everyday engagement with social media by the university students in China and UK. The findings show that social media is deeply embedded in the everyday lives of students in both countries, though the ways it is integrated reflect local cultural and institutional dynamics. Nearly all participants owned smartphones and had consistent internet access, enabling frequent use of multiple platforms. Chinese students relied heavily on multifunctional apps such as WeChat, which extended beyond communication into financial transactions, entertainment, and exam preparation. This illustrates the pervasiveness of digital infrastructures in the network society (Castells, 1996, 2010), where boundaries between economic, social, and educational domains collapse. UK students also used social media routinely, primarily for communication and information sharing, though some expressed negative opinions about its value and appropriateness. Despite such differences, the findings suggest these university students' participation in the network society with the use of social media disrupts the boundaries of their academic, social and personal lives.

8.1.2 Bridging formal, informal, and non-formal learning

The second research question "What role of social media play for these students in formal, informal, and non-formal learning?" focused on the learning aspect associated with social media use. The concepts of formal, informal and non-formal learning and connectivism were used as the theoretical lenses. In sum, the current study found that social media has the role of bridging formal, informal and non-formal learning. This is echoed in by other scholars. For example, Dabbagh and Kistsantas (2012) noted that social media can seamlessly integrate formal and informal learning. Moreover, this study underlines the problem of viewing

different types of learning as separate categories (Malcom et al., 2003), reinforcing the view that formal, informal and non-formal learning should be viewed as a continuum (Rogers, 2014). This study found that with the use of social media, the boundaries between each type of learning become even more blurred: the students' formal learning needs impact the directions they take and choices they make when practising informal and non-formal learning; meanwhile, what the students learn in informal and non-formal settings also affect their formal learning. I have also shown how these practices in turn challenge the hierarchy in the higher education system because the teachers' role of authority and knowledge dispenser were impacted. The use of social media has empowered the students to be proactive by finding the information they need online. From the perspective of Connectivism, this connection is when learning occurs. Therefore, I believe that through the lens of Connectivism, social media is a legitimate learning space and can bridge formal, informal, and non-formal learning into a continuum.

8.1.3 Internal and external factors influencing students' use of social media for learning

The third research question -- "what are the factors that impact their use of social media across formal, informal and non-formal learning" allowed me to explore a range of factors that could influence university students' use of social media in China and the UK.

For the university students based in China, the influencing factors primarily stem from external sources. Foremost among these is the phone-ban policy implemented in many classrooms, which restricts the use of social media. Other practical reasons—such as access, availability, and the cost of social media platforms or learning software—also shape students' choices and engagement.

In contrast, for the university students based in the UK, internal factors are more prominent. These include students' perceptions of and attitudes toward the use of social media for learning. For example, several participants in the UK study (as reflected in questionnaire responses and focus group discussions) explicitly stated that they did not view social media as a legitimate space for learning or chose not to use it for educational purposes. Such negative perceptions often arise from concerns about the distractive nature of social media platforms.

8.1.4 Contexts matters

Context significantly shaped social media practices. In this thesis, context can be understood as *a set of cultural, institutional, educational, and technological conditions that shape how students engage with social media for learning within their specific environments*. In Chapter two I provided a detailed description of the context in two research sites and highlighted the importance of studying such information. I delved into the educational, cultural and technological aspects of the contexts, and through this exploration, it became evident that these two countries are different in significant ways that are likely to impact the use of social media for learning. Thus, I proposed that it was necessary to consider the specific context in which participants are situated when interpreting the findings of this research.

Chinese students' exam-driven use of social media, as reported in the findings, contrasts with UK students' doubts about academic legitimacy of the content on social media platforms. This reflects the influence of national education systems and differences in critical thinking between students in two countries. These contrasts highlight that, although students in both countries share the same global network society (Castells, 1996, 2010), the ways in which digital technologies are appropriated for learning are mediated by the dynamic interplay of local, cultural and institutional norms.

At the same time, the findings also reflect Wellman's concept of networked individualism (2001). Across both countries, students were found actively organised personalised networks to meet their needs, whether through WeChat group chats in China or WhatsApp group discussions in the UK. Yet the scope and form of these personalised learning networks were shaped by context: Chinese students' networks were often directed towards exam preparation, while UK students' networks leaned more towards peer support and intercultural exchange online. This suggests that individual agency in the network society is not entirely free but operates within cultural and institutional boundaries.

In short, the findings reinforce the importance of context: while the notion of network society emphasis a shared digital environment, and networked individualism emphasises personal autonomy, the ways in which students engage with social media for learning are shaped by the intersection of global connectivity and local conditions. This thesis demonstrates that

context—encompassing cultural, institutional, and educational factors—is crucial for understanding university students' engagement with social media.

8.2 Original contributions

As I noted in the beginning of this thesis (see chapter one sec.1.2), research into social media and learning have previously focused on specific social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, this research is one of few studies that have not limited its focus on one or two social media platforms. Instead, it let the participants accounts for their understandings of social media and their actual use of social media. Moreover, this study included two distinct contexts of university students in the UK and university students in China. This also adds its originality considering not enough research taken into consideration of the different dynamics resulted from different educational and social media landscape.

8.2.1 Empirical contributions

the findings of this research on the intertwined relationships between different types of learning support Rogers (2014) view on formal, informal and non-formal learning should be viewed as a continuum instead of separate categories. Moreover, the use of social media was found to contribute to this blend of different forms of learning. This also echoed with existing literature who have shown that social media has the potential of integrating formal and informal learning (Dabbagh & Kitsanas, 2012; Greenhow & Lewin. 2016). Furthermore, this research also signalled the challenge to the established hierarchy within the HE setting. Specifically, it has shed light on how students were leveraging social media platforms for their learning needs, thus impact the teacher's authority and knowledge dispenser role and potential imbalance of educational resources between different HE institutions.

8.2.2 Theoretical contributions

This research makes three theoretical contributions:

Firstly, this research demonstrates connectivism (Siemens, 2005a) could be used in explaining learning on social media or theorising social media as a learning space. Together with concepts of formal, informal and non-formal learning (UNESCO,2009) may help develop more nuanced understandings of learning in different contexts with social media. The findings support connectivism by illustrating how learning occurs through distributed networks.

However, they also extend it by showing that connections are not inherently beneficial, students must critically evaluate credibility and manage distraction, aspects underemphasised in connectivism.

Secondly, this study confirms Castells' claim that digital infrastructures reshape communication and learning, but it critiques his framework for its excessive generalisation. The data demonstrate that manifestations of the network society are also shaped by local cultural and institutional contexts, producing uneven patterns of social media use.

In addition to this, this research also contributes to conceptualise social media as a broad concept. I gave my own definition of social media as the following: a collection of constantly evolving digitally networked platforms that enable users to interact with other users through activities such as (but not limited to) online communications, content creating and sharing. The findings of this study showed the participants understanding of social media extends beyond traditional social networking sites and include various digital platforms that may be considered as digital technologies in other studies (i.e., Henderson et al. 2017).

Together, these critiques advance theoretical understanding by positioning social media as a legitimate educational space shape by personal preferences, institutional regulation, and cultural norms. However, it has to be used wisely.

8.3 Implications

8.3.1 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to theoretical debates by extending and critiquing existing theories for understanding learning in digitally mediated contexts. While connectivism (Siemens, 2005a) was useful in terms of explaining how students construct learning through distributed networks, the findings highlight its limitations: connections are not inherently valuable unless students can critically evaluate credibility and trustworthiness of these sources, manage distraction, and negotiate institutional constraints. Similarly, the concept of the network society (Castells, 1996, 2010) helps explain how digital infrastructures underpin everyday communication and learning, but the findings show that it is affected by cultural and institutional contexts. Lastly, while networked individualism (Wellman, 2001) captures students' personalised construction of networks, this study demonstrates that such agency is

shaped and sometimes constrained by external factors such as exam-driven cultures in HE (in China) and legitimacy concerns of social media (in the UK). Together, these insights advance theoretical understandings of social media as a disputed learning space—a space where autonomy, cultural pressures, and institutional authority intersect and has to utilise with caution.

8.3.2 Practical implications

For university educators and policymakers

Tensions arise when the university opts to eliminate technology use in the classroom. As shown in the Chinese study, participants expressed considerable frustrations towards the phone ban policy. In rare cases when the teacher supported phone use in the classroom, the opportunity to proactively search for study-related information online was met with appreciation from the students. In the UK study, while there were no strict prohibitive measures evident in the classroom, certain participants within the focus group conveyed their desire for greater integration of educational technologies into the learning environment.

In addition, serving as a primary educational institution, the university bears the responsibility of directing students and nurturing their digital competencies while bolstering their learning endeavours through technology. University educators and administrators may consider developing workshops or seminars that focus on evaluating online information, developing critical thinking, and responsible technology use, showing students how these skills are transferable to their academic and professional lives.

HE institutions need to recognise social media as a legitimate learning space for students under caution. In China, classroom phone bans limited students' access to valuable online resources, prompting workarounds that created tension between student autonomy and institutional control. These findings suggest that policy needs to move beyond binary distinctions between formal and informal learning and instead recognise the interconnected digital learning ecologies that students navigate. At a national level, policymakers should promote digital literacy initiatives and provide guidelines for responsible and effective use of social media in education. At an institutional level, universities could benefit from policies that acknowledge and support students' informal digital practices, ensuring that regulatory measures do not inadvertently undermine opportunities for learning in the network society.

For university students

The current study has explored the experiences of university students in both China and the UK concerning their interactions with social media in everyday life as a university student as well as the role of social media in these university students' learning. The students' narratives, particularly those shared during focus group discussions, may resonate with other university students. University students need to realise that there is a wealth of learning resources on various social media platforms, and that this is likely to be beneficial for formal, informal and non-formal learning. Though education and regulation may help, the ultimate responsibility lies with them to critically assess and appraise this information.

Moreover, it is crucial for university students to recognise that their casual browsing could actually serve as a type of informal learning. Consequently, they should exert caution regarding the online content that they consume. It was heartening to observe that certain participants in this research exhibited discerning judgment concerning the reliability of online information. It is advisable for them to continue enhancing their awareness that not everything found online is accurate. They have the option to cross-check the same topic using different sources for validation. They may want to consider integrating the knowledge they acquire within their academic institution into their everyday casual scrolling on social media by following verified academic accounts.

For educational technology companies

This study has shown university students' various learning practices on social media platforms and many other digital platforms that may not be conventionally considered as social media. It is evident that there is a substantial market for educational technologies, particularly the development of designated apps/platforms for university students. However, when developing such apps/platforms, educational technology companies need to consider their impact on individuals and society. They should ensure that their approach is ethical and responsible, such as protecting the user's privacy and promoting a balanced use of their products. Furthermore, it is important for them to consider the requirements of university students. Many students in this study expressed the challenge of locating authentic information, often spending significant time filtering out irrelevant information. As highlighted by the findings of this research, it is therefore crucial to ensure that the content

provided is reliable. This could be achieved through partnerships with educators and domain experts, as well as content monitoring by qualified professionals. Additionally, careful consideration should also be given to the financial implications for users. This aspect was accentuated by the findings of the Chinese study, revealing that the expense linked with technology significantly influences the decisions of students.

When designing educational applications or platforms, companies may also want to consider the nature of relationships between different types of learning. The successful English vocabulary apps (as in popularity) among the participants in China could be a good example. Many of these apps are free of charge, delivering bite-size information for its learners which are perfect for informal learning situations. Meanwhile, these apps effectively target the demands from students' formal learning in the university, aligning, for example, with the students' pressing needs to succeed in English proficiency exams.

8.4 Limitations

My research has inevitably some limitations. To begin with, this research primarily employed non-probability sampling methods which means generalisability is limited. At the same time, although generalisability is considered an important attribute, during the planning phase of this research, the objective was not to generate universally valid findings. Instead, the goal was to provide a snapshot of how social media is utilised for learning among university students in two specific countries. Moreover, the research emphasises the crucial role of context in comprehending the insights derived from this study.

Limitations also arise from the dynamic nature of the research tools and minor adjustments implemented to address practical challenges encountered during data collection. For instance, the UK-based focus groups were conducted subsequent to the Chinese study, and enhancements to the focus group guide were implemented based on insights garnered from the Chinese participants' engagement. Consequently, this study does not claim to be a comparative one, despite the identical research methods applied across the two study sites.

When it comes to the analysis, a notable drawback pertains to the language aspect. This is particularly relevant for participants in China, as the research was conducted in Mandarin

Chinese and subsequently translated by me into English. Despite my efforts to mitigate translation-related challenges by conducting analysis in Chinese and translating only the relevant excerpts cited in this thesis into English, while preserving the original sentence structure and tone, there remains the potential for some loss of meaning during translation. Simultaneously, given that English is not my native language, during the transcription of the English data, I encountered small amount of audio recordings that were inaudible to me, yet they might be comprehensible to a native English speaker. These instances have underscored the imperfection inherent in any research undertaking. Despite these limitations, I maintain that the chosen research approach was appropriate, and the data collection methods yielded ample data for addressing the research questions.

Lastly, it is worth noting that the data gathered for this study predates the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, it was unable to examine the influence of the pandemic on the utilisation of social media and other digital tools by university students, both for educational purposes and in their day-to-day lives. Nonetheless, the thesis includes a review of post-pandemic literature (2021–2023) to situate the findings within more recent developments.

8.5 Recommendations for future studies

Future studies may contemplate applying a more quantitative-oriented methodology. Given the current study's emphasis on qualitative aspects, future investigations could consider the adoption of a Mixed Methods Research design that places greater emphasis on the quantitative dimension or even opts for a purely quantitative approach. This direction is intended to further delve into potential disparities or connections among various conditions or variables. As the findings from the current research have suggested, students who are studying different subjects in the university may have different attitudes and experiences of the use of technology. For instance, within the Chinese dataset, a participant in the focus group highlighted the utility of social media apps for their English major, whereas participants engaged in science subjects noted the irreplaceable nature of in-class teaching compared to online resources. Similarly, within the UK dataset, a student studying physiotherapy expressed the significance of social media, particularly YouTube videos, for grasping techniques inadequately explained in textbooks. These instances collectively imply that a student's major or field of study could exert influence over their technology usage patterns.

Future studies might contemplate developing a questionnaire that facilitates categorising samples based on their major, year of study, or gender, to explore the differences among different groups.

Moreover, it might be worth considering the involvement of other stakeholders within the higher education environment. Despite the current research priding itself on its bottom-up approach, various findings underline the necessity of exploring the viewpoints of these other parties. For instance, within the Chinese study, delving into the rationale behind the implementation of policies like phone bans in the Chinese context could be intriguing. This could be achieved by conducting follow-up interviews with school policymakers and teachers.

Finally, as mentioned in the previous section there is also a need to explore if and how educational engagements with social media have evolved post-COVID. Much has changed in the use of educational technology, and there may be a need for further cross-context examinations to better understand social media in a nuanced way that does not assume the univocality of students as a whole. In this manner, qualitative and multi method research offers a rich vein of further study.

8.6 Concluding remarks

I would like to reflect on my research journey as the closing thoughts for this thesis. This research was embarked upon a few years ago and I have learnt a lot during this journey. Reflecting back, first of all, I was lucky enough to witness how university students discussed their experiences with social media and how they used it for learning purposes, thanks to the participants in both countries. Secondly, I was amazed by the participants understandings and usage of social media— from the multifaceted ways in which students in both countries engaged with various social media apps and platforms for everyday life as well as tools for accessing information, learning and collaboration. In addition to this, the UK university students who participated in this research, demonstrated an awareness of the issues linked to social media use, including issues like misinformation and the impact on mental well-being. Witnessing young people like them possessing the ability to discern these issues was both enlightening and encouraging. Thirdly, it is clear that students in both countries access information when required, a crucial skill in the connectivist view of learning. We as

researchers or educators need to consider strategies to foster the development of this skill in students.

As this study draws to a close, I note the emergence of the collective embrace of digital avenues for learning as a testament to the dynamic evolution of education in an increasingly interconnected world.

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Appendices

Appendix A- Participants information sheet

Xinyu Luo
PGR student
19/12/2018

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7TJ

University students' use of social media in learning contexts

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT – *questionnaire*

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about how university students use social media in formal and informal learning situations. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a university student and have experiences of using social media. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researchers:

Xinyu Luo, PGR student, School of Education and Lifelong Learning
Supervisor: Prof. Richard Andrews, Head of School, School of Education and Lifelong Learning

(3) What will the study involve for me?

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire consists of both close-end questions and open-end questions related to how you use social media for learning and how you feel about such usage. You will be required to fill in your personal information such as your age, gender and year of study for the data analysis.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

The questionnaire should take you about 20 minutes.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia.

If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time before you have submitted the questionnaire. Once you have submitted it, your responses cannot be withdrawn because they are anonymous and therefore we will not be able to tell which one is yours.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

You might be more aware of the potential of social media use in formal and informal learning contexts. You might gain experience of what a questionnaire looks like in education studies.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

Your personal information such as gender, age will be collected and used in the study, however the questionnaire is anonymous so you will not be identified. The data is used for a doctoral thesis, possibly in the main body of the thesis and also the appendix as the data itself if it is not valid enough for inclusion on the main body of the thesis. All the data will be kept in a password protected computer which only the researcher will have access to.

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to us collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2015).

Your information will be stored securely and your identity/information will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will **not** be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, *Xinyu Luo* will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact *Xinyu Luo by email (nhh17qcu@uea.c.uk).*

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have the right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can access feedback by emailing the researcher. This feedback will be in the form of a one page lay summary but your responses will not be identifiable. You can access this feedback after the data is collected and analysed.

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.
If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Xinyu Luo
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
nhh17qcu@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisor:

Prof. Richard Andrews
Richard.Andrews@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Chair of EDU Research Ethics (Dr. Kate Russell, *Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk*).

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

If you are happy and consent to take part in the study simply access the questionnaire at this website (Microsoft forms) and answer the questions. By submitting your responses, you are agreeing to the researcher using the data collected for the purposes described above. Please keep the information sheet for your information.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.

✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.

✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

✓ I understand that I may leave the focus group at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my comments once the group has started as it is a group discussion

✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐

- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?**
  YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....
Signature

…… ……

PRINT name

……

Date

Xinyu Luo
PGR student
19/12/2018

Faculty of Social Science

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7TJ

United Kingdom

University students' use of social media in learning contexts

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT – *focus group*

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about how university students use social media in formal and informal learning situations. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a university student and have experiences of using social media. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researchers:

Xinyu Luo, PGR student, School of Education and Lifelong Learning
Supervisor: Prof. Richard Andrews, Head of School, School of Education and Lifelong Learning

(3) What will the study involve for me?

You will be asked to participate a focus group of four students. The topic of this focus group is social media use in learning contexts. Questions such as how you use social media for learning, how you feel about using social media for learning will be asked. The researcher will be present to host this group interview and your discussion with other participants will be audio recorded, however your personal information will be kept confidential and you will not be recognized as pseudonyms will be used in the study.

If you are interested in this study, you will also be asked to participant an interview after this focus group. The interview will be a follow-up to discuss some potential problems or facts that emerged from the focus group. Apart from pre-determined questions like 'please describe how you use social media for learning', some random questions related to the focus group results will be asked. You will also be audio-recorded and pseudonyms will be used to protect your privacy.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?
The focus group should be around 20-40 minutes depending on how the participants respond to the questions. There is also a short post-discussion group interviews should be about 10-20 minutes. A minimum of 40 minutes time is required if you are willing to participant both activities.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?
Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia.

If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw at any time. You can do this by emailing the researcher.

For focus group*:* If you take part in a focus group, you are free to stop participating at any stage or to refuse to answer any of the questions. However, it will not be possible to withdraw your individual comments from our records once the group has started, as it's a group discussion.

For interviews*:* You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point we have analysed and published the results.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?
You might experience some psychological risks as the focus group requires you to discuss your experience with other students, you may feel reluctant to speak in front of other people. To avoid this, the researcher will keep the atmosphere of the activity active and stress-free. You also need to consider the potential risk before signing this consent form. You can also withdraw from the study at any time if you feel uncomfortable and do not want to participate anymore.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?
You might be more aware of the potential of social media use in formal and informal learning contexts. You might gain experience of how focus group and interview are conducted to collect data.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?
Your personal information including your age, gender and year of study will be collected and used in the study. The audio recordings of the activities are for analysis only. No third party will have access to your information during and after this study. Your personal information will be kept confidential. The results of this study are for student theses. All the electronic data will be stored in a password protected PC, hard copy data will also be stored in a lockable storage box, only I will have access to the data. The data is intended to be used for a future full-scale study.

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to us collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will

follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2015).

Your information will be stored securely and your identity/information will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Xinyu Luo will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact Xinyu Luo by emailing nhh17qcu@uea.ac.uk.

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form or email Xinyu Luo. This feedback will be in the form of one page lay summary. You will receive this feedback after the data is collected an analysed

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Xinyu Luo
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
Nhh17qcu@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisor:

Prof. Richard Andrews
Richard.Andrews@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Chair of EDU Research Ethics (Dr. Kate Russell, *Kate.Russell@uea.ac.uk*).

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return to form to the researcher before you participate. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.

✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.

✓ The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

✓ I understand that I may leave the focus group at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my comments once the group has started as it is a group discussion

✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐

- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

…… ……

PRINT name

……

Date

Appendix B -English questionnaire

Warm greetings,

You are invited to participate in this short survey for my PhD study.

This questionnaire aims to collect data on your social media use, digital technology involvement and attitudes of using social media in learning situations. Additionally, your personal information including age and gender will be asked. It takes about 10 minutes to fill in this questionnaire. In the end of the questionnaire, you will also be asked if you are willing to take part in a focus group to discuss topics around social media and learning with other students, please leave your contact details, or email me directly at nhh17qcu@uea.ac.uk. This is an anonymous questionnaire, and all the data will be kept confidential.

Please click this link to see the full information of the study. Thank you!

https://ueanorwich-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/nhh17qcu_uea_ac_uk/EchgrEIno29LgCTs1iYKn2YBxiZnntswuc4ZV06TtFq4Jg?e=mCWSNG.

1.I already read the above information and agree to participate. Required to answer. Single choice.

Yes

No

2.Do you identify yourself as a home or EU student? Required to answer. Single choice.

Yes

No

3.Please choose your age group. Required to answer. Single choice.

<18

18-20

21-23

24-26

>26

4.GenderRequired to answer. Single choice.

Male

Female

Nonbinary

Prefer not to say

5.What year of study are you currently in? Required to answer. Single choice.

First year undergraduate

Second year undergraduate

Third year undergraduate

Fourth year undergraduate

Fifth Year

Other

6.Which faculty/school are you in? Required to answer. Single choice.

Arts and Humanities (e.g. History)

Medicine and Health Sciences

Science (e.g. Chemistry)

Social Sciences (e.g. Psychology)

Other

7.What kind(s) of internet connection do you have (tick all applicable)? Required to answer. Multiple choice.

Phone line dial up

Wireless (WiFi)

Cable (Ethernet)

4G/3G/2G on mobile

Unsure

Other

8.What kind(s) of digital devices do you have (tick all applicable)? Required to answer. Multiple choice.

Personal computer

Smart phone

Tablet (e.g. iPad)

Other

9.Please rate your access to the Internet.Required to answer. Rating.

1 Very insufficient

2 Insufficient

3 Average

4 Sufficient

5 Very sufficient

10.Please rate your frequency of using the Internet. Required to answer. Rating.

1 Never

2 Sometimes

3 Average

4 Often

5 Very often

11.In terms of social media use, how advanced are you? *Rating.*

1 Not at all advanced

2 Not advanced

3 Average

4 Advanced

5 Very advanced

12.What is/are your purpose(s) of using social media (tick all applicable)? *Multiple choice.*

Social (e.g.maintaining connections with friends)

Personal (e.g. hobbies,entertainment)

Business

Academic

Other

13.How often do you use social media? *Single choice.*

Daily

Weekly

Monthly

Seasonal

Yearly

Never

14.What social media platform(s) do you use (tick all applicable)? *Multiple choice.*

Facebook

WhatsApp

Instagram

Snapchat

Twitter

LinkedIn

Wechat

Weibo

QQ

Zhihu

Douyin

Other

15.Which one of the following descriptions best suits you? *Single choice.*

I am an active social media user. I use a lot different social media platforms and I also create content and interact with people on social media.

I have several social media accounts just to keep in touch with my friends and family, I seldom post anything on social media.

I only have one or more social media accounts but I rarely use it.

16. Please rate the following 10 statements on social media and learning by choosing either one of the options of “strongly agree, agree, neutral disagree, strongly disagree”.

Mobile phone users: don't forget to scroll down and click the statement and the ratings will be shown.

1. Social media is useful for learning.

2. Social media should be allowed in formal learning situation. e.g. during the lecture/seminar

3. Social media helps with my university work.

4. Social media is a distraction for my university study.

5. I can learn things that cannot be learned in formal education on social media.

6. I use social media spontaneously to learn new things.

7. My use of social media for learning based on my own interests.

8. I enjoy using social media to learn.

9. I am skeptical of social media's potential for learning.

10. I have a positive attitude to the use of social media in learning situations.

Open questions:

17. Briefly describe how you used social media for learning (if any)? (Hint: it could be an example where you used social media to learn something).

18. What are the benefits and challenges of using social media in learning situations (if any)?

19. Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire, if you would like to participate in the focus groups later to talk about all things social media and learning, please leave your contact details (e-mail).

Appendix C - Focus groups guide

Topic guide for the students

The group leader is responsible for asking the questions below; get everyone to discuss the ideas and answers, however you don't have to follow the questions word by word, feel free to expand the questions and ask more in detail.

Please try not to interrupt others when are talking, and if you could, please take turns to answer the questions.

Please keep the discussion at least 30 minutes long.

Aim 1 Self-introduction

* We can start with your personal information, please include your name (can be a fake name but please keep identical through the whole discussion); your age; what you study in the university (your major) and what school year you are in.

Aim 2 Internet and social media use

Do you use have access to the internet? If so, what kinds of internet connection you have (for example, wifi). If not, please share why you do not have internet access.

How often do you use internet?

What do you do when you use internet?

What do you think social media is?

Do you use social media?

What social media platforms/apps you use?

How often do you use those social media platforms/apps?

What do you do on those social media platforms/apps?

How do you feel about those social media platforms/apps? Feel free to talk about anything

Do your friends/course mates/ people you know in the university use social media?

What do they do on those platforms/apps?

Do you follow the university' social media accounts? Why or why not?

Does the information you get from the social media affects your decision of coming to this university?

Aim3 Social media for learning

What kind of information you can get from social media? Can you tell us as specific as which platform and what information?

Is there any information is you found useful? What is it?

Do you use social media in the university?

If so, does social media help with your life in the university? In what ways does social media help? (In detail)

If not, please tell us why you do not use social media in the university, what are your reasons or concerns?

Do you think social media can help with your study in the university? If so, how does it help?

If not, why do you think so? (In detail)

As far as you know, did any of your teachers in the university use social media?

How do they use social media?

Do they use social media in the classroom?

If so, can you describe in detail how do they use it and how you feel (as a student) about using social media in the classroom.

Do you know any social media platforms/apps can be used as learning?

Outside the university setting, do you use social media spontaneously to learn something? (For example, watching YouTube videos to learn cooking hacks), can you describe in detail?

Do you think social media has made your university life easier?

Has social media made studying at home/away from campus easier?

In what situations, you would use social media to help with your study?

In general, what's your attitude towards social media for learning?

Do you think it's helpful? Why? What types of learning it can support? In the classroom or outside the classroom?

If your attitude is generally negative, why?

Aim4 Benefits and challenges

Can anyone give some examples of the benefits you have experienced when you use social media to learn?

Can anyone give some examples of the challenges you've faced when you use social media for to learn?

Is there anything that stop you from using social media for learning?

Is there anything that makes you using social media for learning?

To finish

Is there anything anyone would like to add or clarify?

Additionally, there is a feedback form if you would like to fill in. Thank you!

Appendix D- Example focus group transcript with participants in the UK

O: computing science, second year,21

A: 20 third year psychology

E: 20, second year, culture, literature and politics

G: 23, physiotherapy

L: 20, Geography and international developments third year

T: 18, first year, international relations

D: 19. Law first year

O: access to internet? Wifi,mobile data

A: wifi, mobile

Rest of the group: same

O: how often use internet? I use it 24/7

A: Yeah! all the time

Some people together: Same!

D: trying to stay away from it for a couple of hours in the evening but still most of the time

O: what do u do when use the internet

O: I use for social media and my studies and shopping, laugh

A: probably all of that then also music like I won't walk anywhere without listening to music

E: yeah, same, yeah my work I has to connect to the interment when I'm working

G: yeah, I use it for like uni work and also applying for jobs like using computer...social media, music, streaming stuff like watching films tv

L: yeah, I use it mainly for music streaming and hmm social media and uni as well

T: yeah, same social media, sports streams, music, sort of everything

D: yeah, social media, streaming and uni work that kind of thing

O: How important is the internet for you?

O: I think it's very important because like, I have friends all over and they just tend to use the internet to communicate more, then actually using like phone, email and…

A: yeah, I think it's quite important like I feel a bit ...I know it sounds weird but...like I'm lost without it, if u know what I mean? Like if I can't find my phone I freak out (laugh) because I need it… it's like it connects you to the rest of the world, and...in a way it's like anchors you,

makes you feel safer, because there's gonna be someone in the end of the phone in case something happens.

E: yeah! when I'm at uni I'm quite like…no... I've got internet connection I would like to know all that, because it keeps me connected to what's going on at home as well.

G: I would say it's pretty essential. In terms of work and things...i mean, I don't know about you guys but definitely don't use books that much… (someone in the background: yes) like my course. It's all on the internet and the just keep in touch with friends and family.

L: yeah, like it's quite important in like staying in touch with people family at home, friends elsewhere, and then university as well...I need use the internet to access to all the resources so it's really important.

T: yeah, it's important for me like I probably be okay not using it at home but when it comes to at uni you want to stay in touch with your friends and family back home that sort of...the big role of the internet is sort of the connections… I don't know...as like I'm first year…like sort of being able to contact people here trying to get plans sorted...as well as kind of keep the relationships with people at home and yeah...

D: yeah, I definitely feel that as well, I feel like…first year… we don't really have the internet very much at home so it's kind of novelty? Actually, yeah, but I think now we live in such an interconnected world it's difficult to see how the vast majority of people could go there like day to day life without in some way using the internet so it's pretty important yeah.

A: yeah, you know like even like finding where to go like google map, how did they do it back in the day (yeah, laughter, discussion background) literally…. use snapchat to... find the room (everyone else yes, whole room laughing) which is social media which it's mad (someone: yeah) you can use it to find where you are going…

O: Now we actually gonna move on to social media speaking of that (hehe) so hmm we can hmm anyone wants to list some examples of what they use? At the moment I use Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp Instagram and I think that's it hehe.

A: yeah, I think I'm similar to u but like I don't know, do you use LinkedIn?

O: no...well not as much cause I'm second year so…

A: yeah, you are too young for that (laugh)

O:hehe

E: I use all of it plus twitter

A: yeah same.

L: yeah same

O: any other social media?

G: Does YouTube count?

O: oh yeah it does!

A: Does tinder?! (whole room started laughing, discussion, inaudible)

T: I think dating apps are social media as well

O: oh, okay didn't know it was social media (laugh) learning something new every day hehe.

O: how old you were started to use social media?

O: 10

A: yeah 10

E: 10 or 11

O: even though technically I was too young to use it but…

A: I know but like I don't know if 'club penguin' is that social media? (everyone got excited and started laughing)

O: yeah, I use that as well.

Laugh discussion going in the background (inaudible)

E: I mean mainstream ones. My mum made me to wait until I was 13 or so.

G: I would say I was like 13 just because I had like no internet at home really, I don't have a smart phone or a laptop so...

O: how often do u use social media?

All: everyday!

O: Yeah, I use like 24/7 cause it's like my main communication and entertainment, like you get those YouTube videos just entertainment (laugh) when you are procrastinating.

D: Yeah, I would say probably like hourly (someone in the background: yeah)

O: But even like when I'm like sleeping I still keep my internet on then when I wake up I'm still like sort of up to date.

T: unless I'm like sleeping or playing sports or like when I am out with my friends. It's pretty much most of the time.

A: it's like you would go to when you like waiting on something?

T: yeah! just scrolling Instagram.

A: but I think it's just depends on what apps…like it changed a lot like, Facebook, I don't use it very much anymore...like, it used to be a very big thing but now it's like kind of...it would be a bit weird if you post like 'I had a coffee today' (laugh) people would think you are really strange!

E: does anyone has liked the memory things come out on Facebook.

A: YEAH!!

E: like ...laugh… why did they let me do that!

Laughing sounds

A: yeah like I wanna turn it off like I don't wanna know!

T: I think Facebook is a little bit...like because of XXX (university name) is coming back bit…simply because concrete confessions (everyone yeah!)

O: so Facebook I mainly use it for like to like…society updates (others in the background: yeah, me too). I think that's like my main….

A: yeah! like events

O: yeah

A: I use it too hmm upload photos like in bulk

G: yeah maybe like albums so

A: yeah

O: hmm how do you feel about those social media platforms/apps?

O: hmm to be honest I feel like it can be a distraction hmm but like I let it distracts me so that's on me hehe.

E: I feel like it depends on which ones you are using, obviously. Cause I do love politics of course I use twitter and that to actually keep me updated (others: yeah) I think that's the main reason I …

A: yeah! it's so fast-moving!

E: yeah, especially when something is going on maybe that's probably the easiest way to actually get reliable ideas of what's going on…

D: but then when it's like a big political event is happening that's where I would go, I would go to twitter because I know that, you know, it sounds terrible but also you know something like BBC they actually have to like wait a bit, u know before they put it up on their website... but whereas on twitter I can get the info immediately.

E: yeah.

D: but like you running to the risks of…

G: what's true what's not.

D: yeah!

T: it's a dangerous game, social media has so much sort of fake stuff, plus the sort of manipulation…

E: especially Instagram!

T: yeah, it's all sorts of manipulation...I feel like that's bit of dangerous game.

D: yeah, they are now as detrimental as they are helpful.

T: yeah.

D: whereas like at the beginning it's more so helpful…

T: you can't believe what u see…

G: and others like in the news about them trynna stop the political parties is like paying for ads on social media because that affects how people are voting that sort of thing!

O: I think you can only hear one side of story.

G: yeah, you don't hear the whole thing.

E: It's scary! it's like what we learnt last year in the America like the adverts they are paying like they can target so specifically (others: yeah) when they doing (yeah) to demographic… (inaudible).. where you are even like pages you've liked before they linked back to that they make it look like…

A: probably the algorithm learns what you've liked and (inaudible heated discussion) they just feature back to you back to you so u never actually get to see the opposite side of what you might be…

E: they can be so specific with something...like if they pay the right company to do that only 50 people or whatever to see this ad then it would just disappear after two days then you never know what…no one ever knows it's been there…its terrifying!

T: I agree.

L: yeah, it has such a real effect then u can see nowadays the society views are polarising so much more now than it ever were, and it probably partially...because of that

T: it's because you can...it's like when u see those on social media you would be like it might be it must be right…

D: because like they use algorithm and feature? back to you like everything you see on your feed is what you agree with, so you like oh…

T: because it's so easy to sort of say it for like, before, like I don't know, in 80s, 70s you have to go out to debate it, you know, now u sort of open your phone it's probably…

E: people don't generally follow what they are disagree with, people don't normally follow the people they have different views, so you are just getting your own stuff… reflect back to you.

L: I think quite a lot of posts as well to do with politics more like…gain…certain views rather than the good things that people actually standing for.

G: yeah, and it go further reach like what you have said, and they make it for likes but they may be for like across the world sort of thing rather than for people in their town sort of thing

it would have been in the 80s or whatever so oh other people agree but it's like actually in terms of world population not that many people agree with your view.

O: ok do your friends in uni use social media?

Some people said it together: Everyone, majority of people

L: WhatsApp sports group chats…

O: Facebook Group chats, my course mates and societies Facebook pages

T: yeah

E: Facebook group chat is great when you are starting hmm cause everyone has it and everyone that's hmm a good start point, once u meet people you get to know them then u move on to other things.

G:I think Facebook is the one that's my friends trying to give up but then like they realised they can't give up because of they want the messenger bit they can't give up Facebook (yeah) but they want to give up like the main thing of facebook, that part of social media, but they want to maintain the messaging bit, but they can't do it so end up keeping both so yeah.

O: I feel like Facebook messenger is good when it comes to exam season you can put a question saying you don't know how to answer this.

D: Yeah, mine...like so like I live with two of my course mates as well, so like three of us we're always like oh like do u understand then in the lectures like what have you written for this like for like for the assessment etc. etc. even though it would take less than a second to go like meet each other.. we just prefer to do it on a group chat, like just ask what you think of this what do u think of this argument etc.

L: I think Facebook it's like a broader audience and easy to find...hmm…you've got the groups so u can just join in to…rather than you trying to find your course mates on WhatsApp.

O: yeah

O:do you follow the university's social media account?

Most of the people: yes

A: I don't

Rest of the room: Laugh

O: yeah I find it really useful cause like at least I could just get updated whenever for certain events going on.

D: they are quiet useful reminder like you know you would be like oh the law career affair is tomorrow yeah alright I need to do some prep for that ...so it does actually sort of quite useful reminder... to get of sort of you know academic ...sliding into the like social media…

L: I quite like the SU shop as well.

D: I don't think I followed them (inaudible)… some people I followed

(Heated discussion in the background. Inaudible)

L: but they like constantly posting fun things as well.

O: I think unio has one as well.

E: Yeah I followed that.

E: You tag unio and you post on your Instagram story they will share it.

Everyone: Hahaha laughs

E: and they do competitions for like free coffee kind of things.

O: also, hmm does the info you about the uni from social media affects u coming to this uni?

E: nah not for me personally.

Someone (can't identify): No

L: it didn't affect my final decision but it's just the sports team…to see what sports…

E: is there anyone came here that sort of realize that a way to be... like cause I used to be the internet in general to look at courses and stuff, but does anyone came here that realized u actually liked it? ughh

A: social media isn't really well representation of how things really are so I feel like it wouldn't be the best idea to look at your university like purely based on their social media posts.

L: I think now like the open days from when I was looking compared to them... like the XXX(uni name) sports for example...hmm I'm publicity sec and at the moment I am doing like for your sport club including all the hashtags like 'oh XXX, XXX (uni name) is wonderful (hahaha someone laughed very loudly in the background) like they want social media you know.. they want to be more upfront on it so more of a… (female voice: sense?) ... yeah…and at the open days you can see all kinds of the posts like the ads they do they got the hashtags and stuff.

E: like Instagram I think u search… like I typed in I think in my story like I typed in university...like if you type XXX (uni name) it comes up with their stickers like their personalised stuff.. I don't know if they paid (Instagram)…you can literally tag it to where you are at XXX (uni name) which is quite…

O: yeah when I choose uni like I didn't oh I waited after I actually have to look at their social media pages so it really didn't affect my derisions, cause I thought I would got the same vibe from other universities…

E: yeah that's a thing when u apply to the university the all make themselves look like as good as you can ima….(everyone: yeah) if you look on social media it's all just the big advert (yeah) so they are all exactly the same, just trying to persuade you this is the best uni…

A: that's where the 9 grands a year goes gals laugh.

O: hmm how important social media in your daily life?

O: hmm well social media is important in my daily life because that's basically I get work updates. Societies update hmm course updates as well because emails sort of hmm a form of social media so hmm yeah just important in my daily life.

E: so, it's like can you imagine you go one without it, like I can't imagine not using social media...when I moved to our new house we didn't have Wi-Fi that's stressful like there's no way no easy way to get hold of anybody (laugh)

D: I know it seems difficult but like any time if u go on holiday abroad I always trying to make rules like either I try not to take out my phone in other country or like just logging in but don't use it, that's actually incredibly refreshing, you can go one or two weeks without it and it's almost like when I get back home, turn my phone back on sort of makes me sad, cause like oh yeah this is the world you have to get back to reality...I know it seems difficult it is entirely feasibly and benefit you...

E: I might actually have to try it (laugh)

G: I kind of doing a detox (yeah) even if just a few days, you can let your friends like oh just call me or something if you want to talk but...yeah I just want a detox.

O: speaking of holiday cause usually if I go to another country, I have no Wi-Fi so I ... like when I get home it's like oh! I go to my bed it's like I even haven't got time to check social media… (yeah)

L: I think like with social media platforms I think I could probably go like without it if I start with the internet for like university work and stuff then you still got to sign in and like actual minutes to call if you actually need could be in their contact but like you can be in contact with people if you needed to hmm like the actual platforms.

A: but you can't actually draw that distinction, can't you? Between like the front of social media and the feed you get, the images you see, and that makes you feel a bit rubbish…and u have the DM section where u can actually connect with people you know, people around the world, and if you can like slice that in two and put that aside and keep the connection that would be ideal really…

G: yeah

L: yeah

O: hmm what kind of info from social media?

O: hmm I guess the information I get is mainly like societies and or like the news like ugh they post on twitter Instagram about what's going on and its useful and if its relevant to me but not useful it's just like, like, I'm curious about…

G: yeah, I mean if you are curious about things like I often would search for a hashtag on twitter for like...just to see sports you can get info on that but again that's not always reliable or true.

T: for me I feel like it's sports that sort of stuff... cause there' so many training changing times it's quite difficult to do cause you kind of need to work out like game day, what time you gotta be home what you need to bring for today's training. Occasional films session and you gotta watch that. But like before I came to uni I didn't do that but recently become the sort of the main use of social media.

L: even like societies or sports clubs socials like locations like last minute they would be like oh we are going to this flat yeah hehe.

D: and also I know it's really niche but I suppose I use social media for like community aspects of it but I also a lot of like recommendations because I feel like back in 20 30 years you'd ask your neighbours you're like oh do you have like like… has anybody done work for you like you can recommend or something like that but with a lot of that aspects put into the communities, so I feel like that's for me it's like being replaced and that's the info I do seek on social media is the recommendations.. u know so even like restaurant… and everything in the local area perhaps once would have been done within a family or a community etc. but obviously…

G: I also use social media for like because like my course is quite practical based, like for us we don't really use like textbooks that much, so then us all like videos based so everyone can refresh things and class like physio is around the country will upload the videos of them doing certain techniques in so we will learn through, sounds really bad but we do we learn through social media definitely.

O: like YouTube videos?

G: yeah, YouTube videos yeah definitely they got me through many years hehe but yeah it seems like an unreliable source, but it is one of the main source that we use learn.

O: hmm do u know any social media learning tools u use YouTube, is there any other examples??

A: LinkedIn.

L: Learning tools… maybe it helps you kind of have a like a graduate scheme or like certain areas you particular interested in you can connect with people that way, so it's a good way for the university as you like go tailor towards what kinds of career you want to look at.

G: I think twitter as well so like hmm for courses for stuff outside of your uni course, a lot of them advertise like lectures and stuff societies and again like Instagram has instagram tv and things like videos.

D: it reminds me my A levels there were a number of groups on Facebook…people, the teachers would post… teachers would post like revision and resources almost like every day, there's always be some kind of info coming at you, from those Facebook groups.

L: I think every platform can be used as a learning tool, a levels revision for example, you could have someone whose got Facebook page got the Instagram page got the YouTube twitter got facts and figures and stuff you know maybe other platforms as well but yeah, any platform could probably be useful.

E: definitely some accounts on twitter they sort of breaks down some of the elements what I am trying to learn and make it easier to understands, especially the like, what I do is just communicate with other people like part of that is help us to understand politics, to understands what's going on I think stuff like that is essential, cause like they use so much jargons even when you read it it's ..so inaccessible you need stuff to break it down…

D: I remember those like…like jargon buster.

E: yeah I think by using social media they getting that help of wider audience people who might not necessarily look at BBC news regularly..

A: I think also for like the university is not just about learning what your course is, is about learning about everything and draw on so many disciplines so like a right well balanced essay or a good arguments is about having lots of littles bits of info from other places you can draw on, I think social media is good for that, because you can come across such like a huge portion of different things maybe it's not good for like a strict revision for something u need to go and sit in an exam for but I think it's quite important for like getting ..quit well-rounded, if you know what I mean??

O: overall social media percentage in your university life?

O: I think for me it's like 70% and the other 30% is mainly like when I am not using social media I'm just like using textbooks like...and like just face to face communication.

A: asking (me)what …university life means here? Does it include when I'm home.

Me: both at home and while at university...just the state of being a university student.

A: I don't know…maybe like 40% I don't know its always there in the background.

E: I think...probably like 50-55%? Cause like even when I'm in lectures and stuff I wasn't paying attention I was scrolling through social media when I'm revising it's there in the background if I'm working every hour, I sort of check my phone, it's really depressing when you say it out load (laugh) I probably spend too much time on my phone

G: yeah I would probably say like 50% even if it's not ..like the sports stuff ,even if you are not playing you still engage in with social media, in terms of socials and things like that just trynna find out what's happening ..hmm and my course, quite a lot on social media so

L:I would probably say like 50% as well because other times ill be in my house be like housemates from the uni, talking and sports and then lectures probably 'concentrating'.

T: 40%, because when I'm not sort of…I probably doing sports…or out with friends or sleeping.

D: yeah, I would probably have to go 50 - 55 I have my screen time turned on so I know that I look about well incredibly depressing I spent like 5 or 6 hrs a day on my phone, like just looking at my phone not even including my laptop and like 10-20% down depending on like how much work I need to do.

L: …because I did a module over the summer and a module this semester so 3 hrs a week that's it, before I got into like a routine, I force myself to have like a routine, I literally 10 hrs

a day on my phone and I was just like do something please! laugh so I will just make a routine to come on to campus...

O: does social media help your actual study?

D: I think don't I could say social media… 'helped'? I think when I am look for resources, I can find it using social media but more than not it's more of a distraction but if I can find useful info on there... but more often than not I usually get distracted.

A: it's more like organisational, like getting people like: hey! you do wanna come to the library something like that but less like itself as a tool for learning I think it's more like what it enables you to do, like contact to those…

O: yeah, I mainly use it for my course group chat so I was like asking for help or like probably assignment but mainly exams, for like how did you answer this question?

E:I think I find examples on social media kind of back on what I'm trying to say so it sort of helped I think but like you said, if you looking for the useful things you will find them if u r not then it's, it's, just gonna distracting…

G: I think sometimes it would be good finding like, twitter has a lot of fresh research and in terms of that it can be good resources to find that cause that's how they share it.

L: I think in the first year I found the Facebook group that…course mates and, u know u have your course mates there that's really helpful especially at the start like finding places...just like in general. submitting assignments kind of things, even now in third year we still on that same group chat cause it's still helpful, just get random questions from… people...like some of the questions u haven't even thought of you need the answer too, that helps you as well

T: yeah my course is quite big so it's like not like 100% people on it so it's not like a lot of conversations in the group chat there's a few people but I'm not, not really hmm engage in the conversation yeah I think it's gonna take for like a year or two when the courses finished, some people leave it but for some people like sort of more intense smaller module it's more useful yeah.

L: so, it's like 110 people in the group and it's less it's not really used, it's like a... social media like a chat, discussing things it's more...like if you want, more information, course related it's just all in there.

G: yeah, we do the same, honestly even like little stuff like…if I had an email from a lecturer just be like what are they talking about (someone: yeah laugh) sometimes it's just stuff like that.

E: mines different cause there's only like7 people doing exact the same course but that means we split between hundreds of modules cause we don't have compulsory so we split into like different schools different ...so u use those to sort of module by module keep in touch with different people.

O: lecturers use social media?

O: mine... they mainly use emails to keep us updated…inaudible coughing …if they really wanna ask questions or will use face to face communication. Not really social media except from emails.

D: is blackboard social media? I guess the forum part of it you can ask questions

L: I know a few I know have said a lot go through the societies so ofc as well, so they like they go through the societies' Facebook pages for their course I don't know if teachers in the university...coaches they communicate on Facebook.

A: I think it's quite common obviously when we were in primary or secondary school you want to add your teachers hehe but they are like it's not appropriate to add your teachers on social media, I think it's kind of comes in the university as well, you would never have your lecturer on facebook you wouldn't have your lecturer on snapchat you know (yeah)

E; one of my lecturers came up in my Facebook cause he posted in the tickets exchange that there like (laugh everyone) like I feel wrong, laugh, like you shouldn't be seeing it.

A: like it's inappropriate you have to divide social media from academic life.

D: we found one of our lecturers on her personal twitter and it was just such an odd experience.

T: for me like I bought a ticket from the tickets exchange recently then I realized he is a lecturer here (laugh)sort of bit like odd laugh.

L: I found that hmm during the strike last year? (someone in the background: no two years ago) they I don't know how I just found like loads of my lectures on Facebook I was just interested to see their…as I was scrolling, they post quite a lot to do with the course as well so…

G: our lecturers use twitter like they will tell us where to go on twitter to find something I found ...a little bit odd but like again they also use our society pages and even like our Instagram and they take pictures of it and put it on the open days sort of things they are really like into the social media so they tweet a lot .

D: so, it's more like directly to your course rather than what their personal stuff…

G: yeah, because like they all have like professional so on their personal twitter they say like my opinions are my own but if it's like for course related, they tell us to follow them well encourage us to follow them because they post like latest research and stuff.

D: from what we have seen in law is more like if they released a paper that's what they will tweet or like the resources that actually linked to the course we study.

L: yeah, they have LinkedIn as well, lecturers use it, I personally haven't done it but some of my friends trying to connect to the lecturer trying to…

D: I can never be that brave… laugh everyone

O: what attitudes social media for learning. Well for me really is mainly like using email like getting to know what's to do other than that not really much…

A: YouTube as well

E: like someone said earlier is about picking up those random bits of knowledge that about all sorts of different stuff you can get from social media then you can then use to either realise something interesting you want to look further or like using it for your studies I think both in and out the classroom is really good for that**.**

G: yeah, I use YouTube for like course stuff but also non-course related stuff, like here says cooking and stuff, in my own times I've like just YouTube how to do something when I at home and especially coach tutorials stuff like that laugh.

T: since coming to university, I have done a lot of cooking just because when you come here you just sort of get something from the oven the oven but obviously xxx (university name) accommodation you can't you probably gonna burn the oven laugh that so tutorials yes joking about different accommodations on campus

O: how much social media in percentage you use for your study? Me probably about 40-50% because mainly for like group chat if I needed help and keep updated about what goes on in my lectures.

D: well if it's like how often do I go on social media to study it would be always never but I never actually seek out info for my for, say hmm what I'm studying for…adding on to lecturer note I don't think I would ever go on social media to find info, I would like maybe go on to u know the xxx portal or go to the library to find some journals etc, but I don't think I would ever go on twitter with this specific sort of finding info to like add to my stuff…

L: it's like a summative u have all the info what to do then u read through the lecture notes and then if you still unsure you just ask the group be like…

G: probably be like 60-70% because we have like practical's and then…I am not one of those people can read a book like put your hands like this like, it's like, I have to watch someone do it so yeah I have to use YouTube a lot.

O:What's frustrating about social media?

O: with me I found it like it's helpful but again I get too attached to it like I might go and to find a fact for my study but then I will just end up checking updates and I would say that actually takes longer.

D:do you not like find it tiring to like ugh that have your ugh potentially constantly demanded by social media? But like I have my notifications turned off bc I hate the idea that you know somebody can just out of nowhere like demand time out of my day chuckles so do u not in any way feeling like that?

O: I do but that's like that's the main communication my friends and family use is like if I turned it off then they are gonna think I'm ignoring them for ages hehe.

E: yeah it's frustrating to know that the second the light start to flash on there (phone) I will pick it up because that's just engraved into what we do.

L: I'm like on the opposite I'm the really the annoying friend who's won't reply for hours laugh or like days like those people… (laughter/inaudible) I'm afraid just constantly full of notifications made my other friend like cringe like how can you ignore that I'm just like I'm just used to it cause there's just too many if I swipe all day like just to get rid of the notifications yeah.

G: I think in the university context, for me like the kind of the frustrating thing is like if u r not on like anything you can miss so much! Like so many time I just taking a detox not on it like deleting my apps for like a week or so with sports especially u miss so much...social...training...kind like of like FOMO like fear of missing out not up to date with everything...

A: then it worse like you have it and like you know when you are revising for your exams you are not doing anything apart from revising and like just doing the bare minimum and like you are not doing anything fun and you have nothing to post then you like looking like everyone Instagram post like they are doing fun things you just feel really shit about it, you have not done anything just sad and revise…

D: or like I'm trying to study I am like I cannot get off my phone, I found so frustrating with myself, like I have the time resources and every other thing possible! But I'm stopping myself from doing it because I can't control myself using social media, I found it incredibly frustrating.

G: have you tried the app like the …they block you from using your phone and then like every 20 minutes you get points u can spend them

O: yeah, I had them in exam period

G: it's the best motivation for me hehe.

(Discussion about phone control apps)

L: Plant trees...water them in audible

D: Donate £5 donate!

(Many people started to chat about different apps about productivity, screen time control, many people speaking at the same time could not pick up exactly what they have said)

T: slight tangent but there's one topic that frustrates me about social media is the fact that anybody can use it, some people should just categorically not be allowed to use it laugh it sounds awful but it's like u sort of negatively impacting the world it's like there's no way you can, sort of, like who's gonna play the judge and execution for the bad people in the internet, but some people should just sort of kept…

G: I think they trynna do things like trying to reduce like especially with the terrorist stuff online trying to stop people from being able to share those stuff, but it seems just like an impossible task

O:cause some people get cyber bullied.

G: yeah

T: sometimes it's not even that deep...like sort of, crime, some people just negatively impacting themselves. Like looking in ways really negatively...and looking at it like it really shouldn't being shared or like passing on to others and you cannot stop it and yeah that's really frustrating!

D: an area of law that could be potentially interesting is internet law, is like yeah about all the discussion you have about you know who get to use social media and how it's used anything like that maybe in the next 10 years or so maybe there will be a dramatic shift and but at the moment it's so unpoliced, so it could be very dangerous place

E: which brings back to learning really, if we use it to learn people like just posting opinions rather than like peer reviewed things, people can post anything and if u take it as rather that's true, even that's affecting everyone's belief really.

D: yeah, and if you take that as a valid argument and then start to comparing it against something actual then like then you are giving validity to something that previously didn't have it verify so like yeah I think that is a dangerous thing.

O: what if anything beneficial of using social media for learning?

Someone: Covered

Female voice: Like keep in contacts with Course mate…

Another female voice: Finding info if you choose to look for it.

Group interview/ Q&A

Me: Do you think social media is useful when it comes to communication but not so much for actually learning?

O: Bit of a communication.

Me: Do you agree that social media is a distraction for your degree?

O: Sometimes. It could be helpful if you actually looking for information but then like, I think, sometimes if you like you gonna search something on Twitter but then you get carried away by something else you see.

D: yeah

O: and you look deeper towards that

G: it might be an area of specific… like my area, my degree is pretty much like an exception because it works how it handle things and…for us social media is a good learning tool.

Me: anything else want to clarify?

All: no

Appendix E- Example Coding scheme

Examples of coding open-ended questionnaire results (Chinese questionnaire) using the categories instead of themes

Category /Practice	Initial codes	Example responses from the participants
Information seeking and problem solving	Looking for answers for questions Getting latest news; Looking for resources for assignments. Searching info IN class.	'Baidu searching for unknown stuff'; 'Searching information online'; 'Using my phone searching information'; 'When (I was) in the programming class, I can look for stuff I don't know'.
Online courses (voluntary and compulsory)	Mandatory online class apps 'Shua' online courses; Watching law exam videos; Netease open course; Computing science courses Law exam prep courses;	'Zhidao (app name) for online class; 'Xuexitong (app name, also an for online courses'; '(attending) some optional modules online courses'; '(using) Netease Open Classroom (app name)';
English language learning	English vocabulary learning; Dedicated English learning app/ platforms; WeChat group English learning; Douyin English learning;	'Momo (app name) for memorising English words"; "Everyday check in on Baicizhan; 'Using Shanbei (app name) to learn English words…'
Personal hobbies and interests	Learn badminton; Douyin Dance; Photoshop and drawing; Celebrities' feed Learn foreign cultures	'Using Aiyuke' 'Learn how to dance on Douyin'; 'Learn Photoshop and drawing on Bilibili';
Communicating and collaborating	Sharing learning resources online QQ sharing documents. QQ class group chats; QQ and WeChat discussing study topics	'Using relevant platforms to share and learn various learning materials'; 'Teachers sending documents on QQ'; 'Asking other people study-related questions on QQ'.