

The meaning of likes in Chinese domestic social media: A case study of Chinese students in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the cognition and behaviour of Chinese international students toward the "like" function on Chinese social media platforms, focusing on how these interactions affect their online identities and affective well-being. This study uses the network identity theory and affective well-being theory as the theoretical framework and adopts semi-structured interviews with thematic analysis to study this phenomenon. The findings reveal that Chinese overseas students exhibit varied attitudes towards the "like" function on Chinese domestic social media platforms, which are influenced by factors such as platform type, content nature, and social context. These students demonstrate both positive and negative attitudes towards "like". Positively, "like" are perceived as a form of social support, fostering emotional connections, and reinforcing future positive behaviour.

KEYWORDS

online identity; affective well-being; social media; Chinese students; digital behaviour; cultural context; social interaction

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In contemporary society, social media has become an indispensable part of people's daily life, because it promotes communication between people on different platforms, including entertainment and social aspects (Ellison, Gray and Lampe, 2014). One thing that stands out in common across many social media platforms is the "like" button, which, while seemingly simple, is quite powerful. This function can not only be used to express emotions but also to maintain the development of social relations (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013).

The "like" button is ubiquitous in Eastern and Western social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, WeChat, Weibo, etc.), representing the user's emotional expression, whether it is agreement, approval, or sympathy. Previous research has found that "like" can not only enhance social bonds, but also enhance people's emotional connections, and can also play a key role in social approval and support (Burke, Kaut and Marlow, 2011). Therefore, understanding like behaviour on social media platforms has profound implications for exploring users' emotions and social interactions.

Chinese social media platforms, including WeChat, Weibo, and QQ, have been distinguished from similar Western platforms, showing unique cultural and functional attributes (Chan, 2016). On Chinese social platforms, the "like" function is not only a way of interaction but also a function with social norms and cultural values. In China, for example, WeChat moments give "like" to friends, unlike Western platforms, which place more emphasis on personal expression and self-approval. In

Chinese social media platforms, collectivism and relationship maintenance are more emphasised, so "like" is usually regarded to maintain social relations and express concern (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007). This cultural context provides a unique context for understanding how Chinese users, especially international students, use social media and the "like" function.

According to UNESCO, the number of Chinese students studying abroad has increased rapidly in the past few decades, so in 2020, China has more than 1 million students studying abroad and has become the world's largest source of international students. Among them, these students encountered various challenges in adapting to the new cultural environment, which also affected their social media behaviour. Previous studies have shown that Chinese international students often use Chinese social media such as WeChat to maintain communication with family and friends, which helps them cope with homesickness and cultural displacement (Li, Chen and Duanmu, 2010). Therefore, to study the "like" behaviour of Chinese students, it is essential to base it on their social dynamics and affective well-being in their cross-cultural background.

1.2 Research Significance

This study aimed to understand how Chinese students view and use the "like" button on social media, and examined how their behaviour changes their online identity and emotional well-being. At the same time, the focus of this study is to fill the gap in the research of Chinese students' "like" behaviour on Chinese social media platforms, which has certain academic significance. While earlier research has focused on the role of 'like' on social media (Marwick, 2013), little attention has been paid to how specific groups of international students use 'like' in cross-cultural settings.

This study explores the impact of more frequent use of social media on Chinese students in modern digital interactions and global education, including the need to help Chinese students solve language challenges and deal with cultural differences. In addition, these findings could help social media platforms improve their tools to create better experiences for users from different cultural backgrounds.

1.3 Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to find out how Chinese students studying abroad understand and use the "like" button on social media in China. By looking at the unique social and cultural backgrounds of these students, the study aims to understand how social media shapes their online behaviour and emotional experiences.

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes towards "like" among Chinese overseas students on Chinese domestic social media platforms?
2. How do Chinese overseas students respond to others' "like" or lack thereof on these platforms?
3. What are the differences between the "like" on WeChat and those on other Chinese social media platforms?

1.4 Dissertation Structure

This study is divided into six parts, each of which builds on the previous part to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Part 1 Introduction outlines the research background, significance, purpose, and issues, and outlines the structure of the study.

Part 2 Literature review reviews the existing literature on online identity theory, affective well-being, and social media behaviour, focusing on the "like" function in Chinese and Western contexts.

Part 3 Methodology details the study design, including qualitative methods used for data collection and analysis, and discusses the rationale behind the chosen method.

Part 4 Findings presents the study's findings, focusing on key themes and patterns related to the cognition and behaviour of Chinese international students.

Part 5 discusses the comparison of the findings with previous literature and their implications for understanding online identity and affective well-being in cross-cultural contexts.

Part 6 Conclusion the main research results of this paper are summarised, and suggestions for future research and practice are put forward.

2 Literature Review

This part summarises and reviews the previous literature on online identity theory, social media use, and affective well-being, with a focus on how these concepts apply to Chinese social media platforms and how they affect Chinese students. However, there is still a research gap in understanding how domestic platforms such as WeChat affect the affective well-being of Chinese international students, further emphasising the need for research in this area.

2.1 Online Identity Theory

Identity theory was proposed by Henri Tajfel in 1974, who argued that an individual's social identity is defined and shaped by the social group to which he belongs. Tajfel (1974) believes that individual self-concept is not only based on individual characteristics but also influenced by group identity. Just as identity theory emphasises that individuals form self-perceptions by comparing themselves with other members, such social identity influences individual behaviour, emotions, and attitudes. Later, John Turner (1982) further developed this theory and formed social identity theory, which pays more attention to how individuals construct and strengthen self-identity through group belonging. Although identity theory expands the understanding of identity, critics point out that Tajfel's original theory focuses more on comparison between groups and ignores the complexity of identity and the existence of multiple identities within individuals.

Online identity theory has been formed and developed gradually with the development of network digital technology. Sherry Turkle (1995), in *Life on Screen: Identity in the Internet Age*, through anonymity and virtual character creation, digital platforms allow users to express themselves in multiple ways without being constrained by their real identities. Using case studies and in-depth interviews with groups of Internet users, she explains how anonymity breaks down the boundaries of traditional self-identification and builds new selves in virtual environments. Boyd and Ellison (2007) extended this theory to the impact of social networking sites on identity construction. They think that social media platforms give users a place to show and manage their identities, and this online identity can affect how people see themselves and their sense of belonging. Online identity theory is like traditional identity theory because both focus on how identity and social interactions influence how people view themselves (Goffman, 2023). However, online identity theory pays more attention to how people show their identities on the internet. It looks at how people stay anonymous online and how they can have different identities on the web (Papacharissi, 2010). This theory also studies specific parts of online interactions and how people try out different identities in online spaces.

In past research, online identity theory has been used to study how social media affects happiness. For example, Burke, Kaut, and Marlow (2011) found that Facebook users can improve their emotional well-being through private messaging and direct conversation. They found that interacting with people you know in a group can enhance identity and belonging, which can

improve emotional well-being. This finding suggests that positive online interactions can provide emotional support and social validation, which is why I wanted to study how online identity and anonymity affect well-being. Meanwhile, Tandoc, Ferrucci, and Duffy (2015) also used the theory of online identity, and they found that heavy use of Facebook may reduce emotional well-being. This is mainly due to negative social comparisons and pressure from online interactions. The challenges and downsides of online identity management reveal the complexity of balancing identity and personal emotions in a social media environment.

In previous research, online identity theory also has validity in analysing social media interactions and affective well-being. Research by Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) explores how Facebook "friends" not only provide social support but also help students access useful information and resources for academic and career advancement. This is consistent with ideas about identity management and social support in online identity theory. The study also has important implications for understanding Chinese students' interactions on social media platforms such as WeChat and their affective well-being. How social networks affect individual happiness by enhancing social capital is closely related to Chinese students' interactions on domestic social media. For example, through platforms such as WeChat, international students can maintain contact with their hometowns and access emotional support and social resources, thus enhancing their affective well-being. This provides a theoretical basis for analysing the "like" on WeChat and their influence on the emotional state of overseas students. In addition, Appel, Gerlach and Crusius (2016), when studying the phenomenon of "Facebook envy", found that users are prone to upward comparison when browsing social media, that is, comparing themselves with friends who are more successful or have a happier life and this comparison often triggers negative emotions such as jealousy and anxiety. They further validated the online identity theory through experimental data, showing that such social comparison behaviour can significantly reduce users' affective well-being because users feel inadequate in their own lives when making such comparisons, leading to lower life satisfaction and an increase in negative emotions. These studies show that online identity theory can be effectively used to analyse identity construction and emotional response in social media interactions, providing a theoretical basis and empirical support for understanding and solving my research problems.

2.2 Social media use and affective well-being

2.2.1 The definition of Affective Well-being (AWB) and scholars' views

Affective Well-being (AWB) refers to the emotional state of an individual at a given moment, including both positive and negative emotions. Originally proposed by Ed Diener (1985), he argued that happiness consists of the positive emotions experienced by an individual (such as happiness and contentment) and the negative emotions experienced by an individual (such as sadness and anxiety) and is closely related to life satisfaction. The research conducted by Diener highlights the subjective nature of happiness, which relies on the subjective assessment of life experiences by an individual. Costa and McCrae (1992) further discussed affective well-being under the framework of the Big Five personality theory, paying particular attention to the impact of emotional stability on well-being. They found that the personality traits of individuals, such as neuroticism, significantly influenced their affective well-being. Specifically, higher neuroticism is associated with lower positive emotions and higher negative emotions, an idea that complements the research conducted by Diener and highlights the predictive role of personality traits in affective well-being. Unlike Diener, Costa and McCrae focused more on how intrinsic personality traits regulate the emotional responses and overall well-being of an individual. Lucas (2007) expanded the understanding of affective well-being and discussed how social support affects the affective well-being of individuals.

His research has shown that a good social support system, such as support from family, friends, and colleagues, can enhance the positive emotions experienced by an individual and reduce the negative emotions experienced by an individual, thereby improving overall well-being. The research conducted by Lucas provides a social perspective and emphasises the importance of social relations to affective well-being. Compared with previous studies, the influence of social environment factors on the well-being of individuals is added. Diener et al. (2018) further expanded their understanding of affective well-being by studying the impact of cultural background on well-being. They point out that individuals in different cultures understand and experience happiness differently. For example, people in collectivist cultures tend to place more emphasis on group relationships and social harmony, while individuals in individualistic cultures place more emphasis on individual achievement and self-satisfaction. This is complementary to the earlier research conducted by Diener, showing the cultural differences in affective well-being, that is, people in different cultural backgrounds have different understandings of what constitutes happiness.

While these scholars differ in their definition and understanding of affective well-being, they agree that affective well-being includes the experience of positive and negative emotions and overall satisfaction with life. However, Diener focuses more on the subjective assessment of individuals, Costa and McCrae emphasise the role of personality traits, Lucas focuses on the influence of social support, and Diener et al. (2018) explore the role of cultural background. Through these different perspectives of research, the concept of affective well-being has been more comprehensive and multi-level understanding.

2.2.2 The relationship between social media use and affective well-being

Previous studies have mentioned that the widespread use of social media has had a significant impact on affective well-being. Ellison et al. (2007) studied how Facebook affects college students' affective well-being by enhancing social capital, and the results showed that positive social media use can improve affective well-being by maintaining and expanding social connections. Similarly, Burke et al. (2011) further explained the impact of interaction types on affective well-being on Facebook. He found that active private messages or interactions can generally improve affective well-being, while passive browsing may lead to a decline in affective well-being. In terms of the decline in happiness caused by the widespread use of social media, Tandoc et al. (2015) focused on how social comparisons on Facebook lead to jealousy and depression, and pointed out that negative comparisons have significant negative effects on affective well-being. Therefore, overall, the impact of social media use on affective well-being is multifaceted, with both positive and negative effects.

2.2.3 The relationship between interaction and affective well-being

Positive social interactions, such as supportive feedback and positive communication, generally boost an individual's affective well-being. Cohen and Wills (1985) found that the buffering hypothesis explains how social support affects happiness by reducing stress, which has important reference value for analysing the interaction and emotional response of Chinese students on social media. Burke et al. (2011) further state that direct interaction (e.g. private messaging) and active participation (e.g. commenting and sharing) on social media.

Helps boost affective well-being. However, negative social interactions, such as negative feedback and social exclusion, harm affective well-being. (Kawachi and Berkman, 2001). Leary, Twenge and Quinlivan (2006) studied the impact of social exclusion on emotions and found that excluded individuals experience a decline in loneliness and affective well-being. This provides an

important theoretical background for understanding the interaction of Chinese students on social media platforms and their emotional responses. Especially when analysing how international students respond to others' "like" or ignores, the theory of exclusion can help explain the potential impact of these behaviours on their affective well-being. Liking or ignoring social media platforms can trigger similar feelings of rejection, which can affect the mental well-being and well-being of international students. Tandoc et al. (2015) also pointed out that negative social comparisons on social media (such as feelings of jealousy) can lead to a decline in affective well-being. In summary, previous research has agreed that the nature of interaction has a significant impact on affective well-being, positive interaction helps to improve affective well-being, while negative interaction may lead to the decline of affective well-being.

2.3 The online users' attitudes towards social media interaction

Previous research on attitudes towards social media interactions has explored a wide range of psychological and social impacts on users. Many studies agree that social media interactions have both positive and negative effects on users' happiness. For example, Appel et al. (2016) studied how Facebook use affects social comparison, jealousy, and depression. The study used survey methods to explore a diverse group of Facebook users. The study concluded that frequent social comparisons lead to higher levels of jealousy and depression, underscoring the negative effects of social media interactions. Burrow and Rainone (2017) studied how positive feedback on social media connects to self-confidence. They used experiments to explore this idea. Their focus was on young adults. They found that when a social media post gets a lot of "like", it can really boost self-confidence. This is especially true if the person posting has a clear goal or purpose. This shows that social media interactions can have positive effects. A "like" can work as a kind of social approval. Building on this, Seo et al. (2019) looked at why people "like" things on social media and how trustworthy these "like" are. They used both qualitative and quantitative methods to study how people behave and what they think. They argued that "like" are often seen as a real form of validation. This can build trust and make people feel more positive about the content and the people who post it. This gives us important insights into how users feel about "like" and social media. The study also shows how, in Chinese social media, "like" affect users' emotions and social experiences. This is because relationships and cultural norms are different in China.

The dual nature of social media interactions highlighted by Appel et al. (2016) and Burrow and Rainone (2017) is particularly relevant. Chinese students studying abroad may also experience the support and competitive aspects of receiving "like" on platforms such as WeChat. These studies have contributed to understanding the psychological impact of social media interactions, but they have focused mainly on Western platforms such as Facebook. This focus limits their direct applicability on Chinese platforms such as WeChat. WeChat has unique cultural and functional attributes (Herdin, Aichhorn and Roser, 2022), so while the general principles of social media's impact on well-being are applicable, the specific dynamics on the Chinese platform need to be further explored. Therefore, my research should focus on Chinese social media platforms to better understand the use of Chinese overseas students.

2.4 Social media interaction in Chinese social media platforms

WeChat is one of the most important social media platforms in China, and its unique functions and design features have a profound impact on users' social interaction behaviours (Zhang et al, 2017). Zheng et al. (2022) discussed the "like" behaviour in WeChat moments, focusing on the influence of personality characteristics and content characteristics on "like". They found that

WeChat's multi-functional platform, including social networking, payment, information services, etc., makes user interaction very complex and diverse. Specifically, personality traits (e. g., extroversion) and the nature of friend-circle content (e.g., emotional content versus neutral content) both influence users' liking decisions. This shows that WeChat is not only a communication tool, but also enhances users' social interaction experience through its comprehensive functions.

Not only that, Gan (2017) found that user "like" behaviour was influenced by multiple factors, and users tended to "like" content that they found interesting or valuable. And social interaction is an important driver of "like" behaviour. Users tend to give positive feedback on the posts of their friends or loved ones to maintain and enhance social relationships. These factors are equally important in the social media use of international students. The interaction of international students may be influenced by their cultural background and personal characteristics, thus forming unique interaction patterns and emotional responses. However, Rui et al. (2019) have studied different groups, for example, focusing on how the network characteristics of WeChat affect the well-being of middle-aged and elderly people. The study found that WeChat's network interaction features, such as moment updates and group communication, have a significant impact on users' social support and mental well-being. For overseas students who are more prone to loneliness and cultural integration difficulties (Smith and Khawaja, 2011), such functions of WeChat can help them maintain their connection with China, provide emotional support, and relieve the pressure of isolation and cultural adaptation (Pang, 2018).

Social media plays an important role in providing emotional support and helping people share information (Anan et al., 2020). His article addresses the mental health of Chinese students studying in other countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that social media can provide emotional support for international students. However, it can also bring some problems, such as feeling lonely and mental stress. These questions relate to how international students use WeChat in their daily lives. WeChat is not only a social app, it also provides emotional support and helps students stay in touch with others. This becomes even more important during a pandemic.

Moreover, Barker et al. (1991) studied the difficulties of international students in social and academic environments, including acculturation, social estrangement, and academic challenges. These challenges have prompted international students to seek social support and stress relief through social media platforms. Social media platforms such as WeChat provide a virtual support network to help students cope with the various difficulties they encounter overseas.

Overseas Chinese face many challenges in terms of cultural identity and autonomy. In the process of adapting to the new culture, social media platforms such as WeChat provide students with an important tool to maintain cultural contact and meet social needs (Gungwu et al., 2000). WeChat's versatility not only helps international students maintain connections back home but also serves as a repository of experiences that support their living and studying in a foreign country.

2.5 Research gap

Previous studies have mainly analysed the impact of social media interactions on affective well-being, with a particular focus on Western platforms such as Facebook (Vogel et al., 2014). These studies explored how interactions on social media platforms (e.g. comments, sharing) affect users' emotional state and well-being. However, there is still relatively little research on domestic social media platforms in China, especially on social media interaction among overseas Chinese students. In particular, the research on social platforms unique to China, such as WeChat, is relatively limited.

This gap is significant because China's domestic social media platforms, such as WeChat, have unique cultural and social dynamics that are significantly different from those in the West. WeChat is not only the most used social platform in China, but also integrates multiple functions such as

payment, lifestyle services, and social interaction, and its user behaviour patterns, and emotional responses may be different from those of Western platforms such as Facebook. Cultural differences, platform design, and usage habits may affect users' understanding and emotional response to "like", which in turn affects their social cognition and affective well-being.

In addition, overseas Chinese students, as a specific group, face cross-cultural adaptation challenges, and their social media use and its impact on affective well-being may differ from other groups. Understanding this group's interactions on China's domestic social media platforms and their impact on affective well-being has practical implications for improving their study abroad experience and mental well-being. Especially considering the central role of local social platforms in their daily lives, in-depth research on the interactive characteristics and emotional impact of such platforms can help provide educational institutions and policymakers with more targeted support measures to promote intercultural adaptation and the mental well-being of international students.

Therefore, this study will fill this gap and explore the use of Chinese domestic social media platforms (especially WeChat) among Chinese overseas students and its impact on affective well-being, thereby providing new insights and practical recommendations in related fields.

3 Methodology

This part explains how the study investigated the "like" behaviour of Chinese students studying abroad on Chinese social media platforms. It focuses on their feelings about "like", how they react when others "like" or ignore their posts, and the differences in "like" behaviour between WeChat and other platforms like Weibo. To meet these research goals, the study used a qualitative method, involving semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to gather and understand the data. The following sections explain the research method in detail. This includes the research approach, research design, how data is collected, how data is analysed, and the ethical issues involved.

3.1 Research Philosophy

In this study, the onion model proposed by Saunders (2009) was adopted, which explained the different steps in the research process. This model goes from the broad concepts of research philosophy to the exact methods used in research to help researchers understand their methods, choose the right methods, and organise their research so that the whole process is clear and understandable.

The main method of this study is interpretivism. Interpretivism is a way of thinking in qualitative research that holds that social reality depends on how everyone perceives it. Because researchers need to understand how people view and understand their own experiences (Bryman, 2016), and interpretivism pays special attention to personal meaning and social context, which is useful for studying complex social topics, this study mainly adopts interpretivism, such as how Chinese students use "like" on social media. This approach assumes that social events are complex and always changing (Urry, 2000; Giddens, 2023). Therefore, researchers must explore these events in depth to understand the participants' experiences and their social connections.

In contrast to interpretivism, positivism is an alternative approach to research. Positivism is based on the scientific method, which attempts to find general answers by using careful measurements and statistics (Crotty, 1998). This method is commonly used in quantitative research in science and social research, using reliable and objective data to test ideas. However, since the purpose of this study is to understand the personal experiences and behaviours of Chinese international students on social media, positivism is not the best choice. Therefore, this study adopts interpretivism. This approach helps explain how people behave and feel in specific social and cultural situations

(Bryman, 2016).

Interpretivism is chosen for this study because it focuses on exploring the personal experiences and feelings of Chinese students abroad regarding "like" behaviour. This approach helps researchers understand how people interact on social media through their personal stories, not just by measuring their actions. It is especially good for understanding how culture affects social behaviour and feelings because it considers the personal and complex nature of interactions between researchers and participants (Creswell, 2013).

3.2 Research Design

As Creswell (1998) explains, qualitative research can get detailed information by listening to and understanding what people say. First, qualitative research can explore the feelings and experiences of the people being studied. When studying how Chinese students use social media while abroad, participants share their personal stories and views in their own words, which can uncover many hidden and complex patterns of social behaviour (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). For example, interviews allow the researcher to explore the participants' personal experiences through open-ended questions, helping them gain deep personal insights. Focus group discussions can bring out more opinions and conversations through group interaction, showing social connections and shared views among participants (Morgan, 1996). Also, observational methods give a direct record of real behaviour, letting researchers see the participants true actions and interaction patterns in a natural setting (Patton, 2002).

second, the flexibility of qualitative research methods lets the research be adjusted and improved based on participants needs and feedback, leading to a deeper understanding of the study is focus (Patton, 2014).

As an important method in qualitative research, interviews have strong advantages and can provide special value in getting deep information and capturing changes in feelings and opinions. First, interviews let researchers ask deep questions based on what participants say, which is a flexible and interactive way to capture small emotional changes and details in their views (Seidman, 2006). Through face-to-face communication, interviewers can change questions as they go and explore participants personal stories and reasons, resulting in richer and more complete data (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002).

3.3 Data Collection Methods

This study chooses semi-structured interview as the main data collection method, because semi-structured interview can not only obtain detailed data, but also allow researchers to ask questions freely under the fixed topic framework, to have a deep understanding of participants personal experience and expressed views (Adams, 2016).

The interview questions were designed around research questions to gain insight into participants' attitudes toward "like", reactions to other users "like" or ignoring them, and how "like" behaviour on WeChat compares to other platforms. The questions were designed to guide participants in sharing their true feelings and specific experiences. For example, interview questions include: "How do you feel about 'like' on Chinese social media platforms"? "How do you react to receiving or not receiving 'like' on social media"? And "How do you think 'like' on WeChat are different from other social media platforms"? The questions were designed to explore the meaning and impact of "like" in different contexts, based on participants personal experiences and emotional responses.

In addition, the study included pilot interviews with the first two participants. In the process of

the pilot interview, this researcher found that some problems need to be adjusted. For example, the original question "How do you feel about 'like' on Chinese social media platforms"? It was amended to "What is the role and significance of liking when you use Chinese social media"? This adjustment makes the questions more relevant to the participant's experience and leads to deeper and more specific responses. In this way, this researcher can ensure that the final interview questions more accurately capture the participants' true feelings and experiences, thus providing more valuable data for the research.

The subjects of this study are Chinese students over 18 years old who have been studying in the UK for a long time. These students must have experience using China's domestic social media platforms, especially WeChat. The selection of samples was carried out through a personal network as well as a snowballing sampling method to ensure that participants with relevant use experience could be obtained. The total number of respondents is 10 because, in this study, 10 respondents were selected to ensure that the data saturation point could be reached. In qualitative research, data saturation means that during data collection, further interviews do not provide new topics or information (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006).

Each interview is expected to last approximately 30-45 minutes and all interviews are conducted through offline interviews to effectively communicate with overseas students. The selected locations are open and public, and all interviews are recorded and transcribed to ensure data accuracy and completeness.

3.4 Data Analysis Methods

The thematic analysis method was used to analyse the collected interview data. The thematic analysis is an analytical method used in qualitative data to identify, analyse, and interpret themes or patterns in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

thematic analysis provides several advantages for this study:

Thematic analysis is highly adaptable and can handle a wide range of research questions and data types, especially for delving into different aspects of "like" behaviour on social media platforms. It enables a deep understanding of social phenomena by focusing on themes and patterns, providing a comprehensive analysis of participants' subjective experiences and emotional responses. This approach is particularly applicable to exploring how individuals make sense of their social world, especially in understanding the social media behaviour of Chinese overseas students and its cultural implications. In addition, thematic analysis effectively identifies key patterns and themes of "like" behaviour on social media platforms and helps to gain insight into participant's attitudes and reactions.

Here are the six steps of thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke (2006):

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1. Familiarizing with the Data: All interview recordings will be transcribed verbatim. Researchers will thoroughly read the transcripts multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding of the data and identify potential patterns.

2. Generating Initial Codes: Initial coding will employ open coding techniques to label key concepts related to the "like" experience, such as "social pressure," "emotional response," and "cultural differences." Manual coding is preferred, as it allows for a deeper comprehension of the data, offers flexibility to adjust codes based on new insights, ensures context sensitivity, and enhances reliability through detailed validation. This method yields a more nuanced and contextually relevant analysis compared to automated approaches.

3. Searching for Underlying Themes: Initial codes will be organized into broader themes by identifying patterns among the codes. This process will help form overarching themes, such as "the

emotional significance of "like" and "the cultural context of social media behavior."

4. Reviewing Themes: A comprehensive review of all data will ensure that it accurately reflects the identified themes. Some themes may be merged or refined to capture subtle patterns more precisely.

5. Defining and Naming Topics: Each topic will be clearly defined and described, explaining its relevance to the research question and ensuring accurate communication of its meaning.

6. Reporting Findings: Reports will be written to organize and present the results of the analysis. Each main topic will be described and explained in detail, supported by quotes from participants to reinforce the findings.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

In this study, I interviewed Chinese students over the age of 18 studying in the UK. I made sure I got their permission and protected their privacy. Prior to the interview, I contacted the students to obtain their consent and to ensure that they agreed to participate and understand the content of the research. I will use anonymous names like "Participant 1" and "Participant 2" to keep their identities secret. Participants can stop at any time during the interview. I will watch their feelings and body language to make sure they feel comfortable and safe. If someone seems uncomfortable, I quickly change the subject to avoid making them more uncomfortable. I keep all data confidential, and participants can contact me within 14 days of the interview to have their data deleted. The data is encrypted and stored securely on a secure server that only researchers can access. We also provide a 24-hour mental health support line for anyone who may need help.

As a researcher, I took safety measures to protect myself during the interview, such as choosing public places and immediately seeking help if I felt uncomfortable. I follow a code of ethics to ensure research is fair, clear, and honest.

4 Finding

This part shows the results from interviews with Chinese students in the UK about how they see and use the "like" button on Chinese social media. The results answer three main questions: how students feel about "like", how they react to getting or not getting "like", and how "like" on WeChat are different from "like" on other Chinese social media platforms.

4.1 Chinese students' attitudes towards "like" on domestic social media platforms

Chinese students have different opinions about the "like" button on Chinese social media

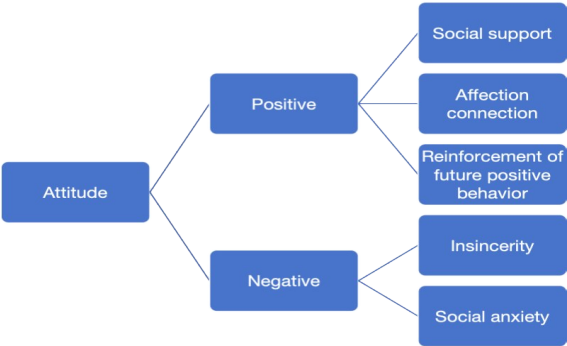


Figure1 Attitude

platforms. Their views depend on several things, like which platform they are using, what the content is about, and the social situation where the "like" is given or received. These opinions can be grouped into two main themes: positive feelings about "like" and negative feelings about "like".

4.1.1 Positive attitude towards "like"

Some participants have shown positive attitudes towards "like". This organising theme includes three sub-frames: social support, affection connection, and reinforcement of future positive behaviour.

Many participants expressed a positive attitude towards getting "like", seeing it as a form of social approval and support. For example, participant 1 mentioned that liking helps to "maintain social relationships", especially with frequent liking. Participant 9 pointed out, *"As an international student, the geographical distance is far from other people's posts, when I am often liked by others, I will not feel that this person is a stranger, and liking will narrow the contact between old friends who do not often contact"*. Participant 7 also pointed out that *"I often give my teachers and leaders 'like' intentionally. I don't pay attention to their content, but only care about the behaviour of giving them 'like', because it will make me show a lot of presence in front of the teachers or leaders, to increase my exposure or maintain some social relations"*. It must be mentioned that in Chinese culture, "GUANXI" refers to a social bond based on mutual trust and reciprocity. It differs from the Western term "relationship", which tends to refer more to an emotional or professional connection between individuals (Yang, 2016). China's relationship is more of a social network, a systematic and long-term accumulation of social capital. Combined with respondents' responses, this suggests that "like" helps maintain a sense of connection and familiarity on China's social networks.

"Like" are crucial for forming an "emotional connection" between people. Because "like" are often used to indicate agreement, appreciation of aesthetics, or appreciation of shared content. This suggests that "like" are a simple and effective tool for expressing support and strengthening relationships. Participant 3 stated that *"if I see someone 'liking' my content frequently, I may be more willing to interact with them and may even feel closer to them"*. *"I think 'like' is a kind of emotional link between people. A 'like' can be a simple expression of liking something someone has posted on social media, but it can also be a liking to the publisher. This may allow strangers with similar interests to create emotional links with me."* Participant 5 said *"Liking plays the role of a 'Courier' in social media. Liking sends 'like' from others and strengthens my social identity"*. Getting more "like" tends to make people feel accepted and validated, increasing their sense of self-worth. In addition, participants saw likes to reinforce positive behaviour and content creation. Participant 6 mentioned, *"My posts are more likely to be liked when my friends agree with me or support me, or when I share travel photos on major festivals, so I am more willing to share this content, and my mood will be happy because of the likes every time I travel"*. This suggests that likes are an affirming way to share experiences and positive moments in life. At the same time, participant 3 also explained his experience, *"When I was in junior high school, I had no ideas about aesthetics and dress, I would try different styles of dress and post on social media platforms, and later found that the posts that suited my style of dress would get a lot of likes, and I also found the clothes that suited me through the likes, which benefited me for life"*. Since then, I have been more willing to share on social platforms, which has encouraged me to create". As a form of positive social feedback, likes help users have a positive emotional experience on the platform, which encourages users to continue to engage and share content.

4.1.2 Negative attitude towards "like"

However, not everyone's attitude towards "like" is positive. This organising theme includes two

sub-frames: insincerity and like anxiety.

Some participants expressed a more critical view, suggesting that "like" could be superficial or insincere. Participant 4 mentioned that *"like, especially on platforms like WeChat, can feel perfunctory or routine, lacking real interest or emotional engagement"*. Participant 2 also mentioned the same concern: *"I usually like others only because I feel it is a social obligation between adults, it is not an expression of my own heart, because sometimes I think I have to like others' posts to avoid being perceived as unsocial, and in the long run I feel that the motivation for liking is not sincere"*. This view underscores skepticism about the meaning of "like", suggesting that "like" may often represent a superficial form of social interaction that does not necessarily reflect genuine engagement or support.

In addition, stress and social comparisons associated with the number of "like" were recurring themes for participants. Participant 5 first proposed that *"when the number of 'like' is less than expected, it may cause negative emotions, such as I will have some self-doubt or anxiety, and then affect self-perception. To get more 'like', I will change my behaviour or expression on social media to conform to other people's expectations"*. This illustrates how the number of "like" is sometimes used as a measure of popularity on social media, which can lead to feelings of self-doubt or anxiety if posts don't get the expected number of "like". This sentiment was echoed by Participant 2, who explained: *"I don't care about getting 'like', but I do feel pressure to hide some posts from certain people to avoid criticism"*. This reflects concerns about their social status and acceptance in their peer group, illustrates how the dynamics of liking affect self-esteem and social interactions, and suggests that liking is less anxiety-related than expected to trigger mental well-being. *To get more likes, I would change my behaviour or expression on social media to conform to the expectations of others"*. This illustrates how the number of "like" is sometimes used as a measure of social media popularity, which can lead to self-doubt or anxiety if posts do not get the expected number of "like". This view is the same as that of Participant 2, who said, *"I do not care if I get 'like', but I do feel pressured to hide some posts from certain people to avoid criticism"*. This reflects their focus on social status and acceptance within their peer group, illustrating how the dynamics of "like" affect self-esteem and social interactions.

4.2 Responses of Chinese domestic social media platforms to others' "like" or ignorance

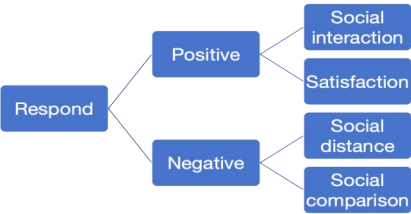


Figure2 Respond

Participants' responses to receiving or not receiving "like" varied, reflecting different interpretations and expectations of social interaction on these platforms. It includes two organising themes, which include a positive response to receiving a like and an unexpected negative response.

4.2.1 Positive response after receiving a like

Some participants reported positive reactions to receiving "like". This organising theme includes three sub-frames: social interaction, satisfaction, and the communication bridge.

In talks about social media, many participants said they feel good and behave positively when

they get a “like”. They think that “like” are not just a simple way to show approval but also help to keep and improve social connections. For example, Participant 1 said, *“When I get a ‘like’ from friends in Moments, I tend to like their posts back, keeping the social interaction going”*. Additionally, giving a “like” is seen as more than just a one-way action, it is also a way to start conversations. Participant 10 said, *“A ‘like’ not only shows support for a friend but also can lead to more conversation”*. By liking, users can virtually maintain and strengthen their social network, creating an atmosphere of ongoing social interaction. This mode of interaction not only helps to consolidate existing social relationships but also expands new social circles, further enriching, and diversifying users’ social experience.

In addition, receiving “like” often makes them feel happy and fulfilled, especially when sharing personal achievements or memorable moments. *“Getting many “like” on a post, especially those that share personal achievements or memorable moments, brings a sense of well-being and satisfaction”*, Participant 5 explained. Not only that, but the sense of happiness and satisfaction that comes from liking can also motivate users to share more details of their personal lives and achievements to some extent. Participant 6 said, *“When I see my friends praise me for my progress and achievements, I feel a deep sense of encouragement, which makes me more willing to share positive moments in my life, which keeps my real life motivated”*. This positive emotional feedback mechanism not only enhances the user’s sense of self-worth but also encourages them to engage and interact more on social media, thereby further consolidating and expanding their social networks and real-life self-improvement.

4.2.2 Negative reaction to unexpected

For unexpected negative reactions, this organising theme includes two sub-frames: social distance and social comparison.

Conversely, not getting “like”, especially when expected, can have a negative emotional impact. Participant 10 mentioned that *“not liking my posts creates a sense of social distancing or being ignored, potentially leading to feelings of being ignored or disconnected from their social networks”*. This highlights how a lack of expected engagement can affect perceptions of relationship strength and closeness, and thus the affective well-being of participants.

Participants also described experiences of social comparison and anxiety when there were no “like”. Participant 8 said: *“seeing someone else’s post get a ton of “like” while my post does not can make me feel inadequate or self-doubt”*. This sense of comparison is particularly strong on platforms that emphasise visibility and engagement metrics, potentially affecting users’ self-esteem and the way they use social media.

4.3 Differences in “like” between WeChat and other Chinese social media platforms

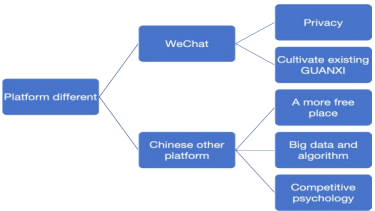


Figure3 Platform different

Participants highlighted significant differences in perception and use of the “like” function on WeChat compared to other Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin. This includes two organising themes, focus on WeChat, and focus on other Chinese social

media platforms. This includes two organising themes, focus on WeChat, and focus on other Chinese social media platforms.

4.3.1 WeChat "like"

This organising theme includes two sub-frames: privacy and cultivating existing relationships.

"Like" on WeChat are seen as more private and focused on relationships. Since WeChat moments are mostly shared within a closed circle of friends and family, "like" on the platform are seen as expressions of support and maintenance of relationships, rather than public recognition. Participant 3 and Participant 5 also indicated that the "like" on WeChat were usually to maintain close social ties, indicating that the "like" on the WeChat platform were more about strengthening existing personal ties than seeking broader social approval. For example, participant 6 mentioned, *"I like people who are potentially helpful to my development on WeChat, such as teachers, leaders, and close relatives because it is the lowest cost way to help me maintain these relationships"*.

In addition, WeChat pays less attention to public verification. Participant 9 mentioned, *"I value interaction on WeChat more because it comes from feedback from known contacts rather than from a wider audience"*. In contrast, on other platforms, people may seek "like" to gain public affirmation or visibility. This suggests that WeChat "like" are more about cultivating existing GUANXI than expanding one's social reach.

4.3.2 "Like" on other platforms (Weibo, Xiaohongshu, Douyin)

This organising theme includes three sub-frames: a more free place, big data and algorithm, and competitive psychology.

In contrast, "like" on platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu and Douyin are more public-facing and are often seen as an indicator of the popularity and acceptance of content. Participant 10 observed that these platforms tended to have more open-ended interactions, with "like" being a form of public approval. *"For example, Weibo has become a place where I do not feel pressure to post. I am free to express myself and judge public opinion based on the number of 'like' and comments I receive"*. He highlighted the less open and restrictive nature of these platforms compared to WeChat.

In addition, these platforms emphasise popularity and visibility, which means that "like" are often interpreted as more important public recognition. Participant 7 pointed out: *"In Xiaohongshu, the algorithm will push content that looks good or provides useful information, and the number of 'like' directly affects the spread of the post"*. This algorithm-driven engagement strategy sets platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin apart from WeChat, whose content exposure is more predictable and linked to existing social networks, based on WeChat's original circle of acquaintances, whose content and relationships are closely linked, so that if you have the same friends, you will get the same content. Other platforms are more based on data algorithms so that everyone will receive different content according to different preferences. Participant 2 said that *"the 'like' function of Xiaored Book and Douyin platform is more closely related to her functional folder to save and store some technical content that she may use"*. Over time, because of the calculation of the algorithm, remembering his preferences, his platform will push similar content.

Finally, participants discussed the nature of competition related to "like" on these platforms. Participants 1 and 6 noted that people may feel a sense of competition to accumulate "like", especially among influencers or those looking to expand their social media presence. *"On platforms like Weibo and Xiaohongshu, people compete to get as many 'like' as possible, thus forming a psychological state of liking anxiety"*, Participant 5 said. This competitive atmosphere affects the mental state of users and their overall experience on these platforms, creating a dynamic that is

markedly different from the more personal and interpersonal interactions on WeChat.

5 Discussion

This part will discuss the comparison between my research findings and those presented by previous researchers in Chapter 2, as well as the practical significance of my findings. This chapter consists of four parts, namely: Online Identity, Affective Well-being, Online Users' Attitudes towards "like" and Overseas Students' Responses and Perceptions.

5.1 Online Identity

Online identity theory explores how individuals construct and express their identities on digital platforms (Turtle, 1995). The theory highlights how anonymous and flexible online approaches allow users to explore and display different parts of their identity without being constrained by real-world social rules. According to Turner's 1982 social identity theory, online identity is also influenced by the groups people belong to and social interactions. On social media platforms, people often present themselves according to the groups they belong to, which changes the way they build their online identities.

This study supports the idea of online identity and shows that Chinese students change their online identity based on the social groups they interact with and their cultural background. The results from the fourth chapter reveal that participants often adjust how they present themselves on platforms like WeChat to match the expectations of different social groups. For instance, some students share more formal and positive posts on WeChat moments, while they show a more genuine and personal side in private group chats. This behaviour fits with Turtle's theory (1995) about anonymity and having different identities online.

The study also found something new: Chinese students often show a more varied and open identity on international social media platforms like Instagram or Facebook. This new finding adds to current ideas about online identity and suggests that cultural context and the features of different platforms play a big role in how people present themselves. This might show that these students have different needs for self-identity in a cross-cultural setting.

Additionally, this study highlights the role of cultural context in building online identity. For Chinese students studying abroad, their online identities often reflect their efforts to balance and merge their identities in different cultural settings. This adds to the idea of online identity theory, suggesting that identity creation online is influenced not just by being anonymous and group membership but also by cultural factors.

5.2 Affective Well-being

Affective Well-being theory is concerned with how a person's feelings, including positive and negative emotions, affect them at a given time (Diener, 1985). This theory states that a person's affective well-being is influenced not only by their own feelings, but also by their surroundings and interactions with others (Lucas, 2007). Previous research has shown that on social media, interactions such as "like" and comments have a significant impact on affective well-being (Burke, Kraut and Marlow, 2011).

This study supports the idea of affective well-being, showing that social media interactions, especially receiving and giving "like", directly affect how Chinese students feel. As seen in Chapter 4, many participants said they felt happier and more satisfied when their posts got a lot of "like" on platforms like WeChat and Weibo. This matches Diener's (1985) idea that positive feedback on social

media can improve a person's mood. My study also found that negative feelings, like anxiety and feeling inadequate, were common, especially when posts did not get the expected "likes" or when students felt they were being compared unfavorably with others. This matches what Lucas (2007) and Diener et al. (2018) found: affective well-being is affected not just by good things but also by negative experiences from social interactions and comparisons. The results show that how Chinese students feel is closely linked to how much they engage with and are accepted on social media. This reinforces the idea that social environments and interactions are key to affective well-being. This study also helps us understand affective well-being better by showing how cultural and social contexts affect feelings about social media interactions. Participants often changed their online behaviour to avoid negative feedback or rejection, showing a unique cultural response to social media. This finding adds to current theories, suggesting that cultural expectations and norms strongly affect affective well-being online, especially in a society like China where social harmony and group identity are very important (Hofstede, 1984).

5.3 Internet users' attitude towards "like"

Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) mainly discuss how "like" on social media become important in the social world and how it affects how people interact and connect with others. Similarly, my research also found that Chinese overseas students have mixed feelings about the "like" function on Chinese domestic social media platforms. Some respondents regard "like" to maintain social relations and show recognition, while some respondents believe that in China, "like" is not just a preference, but a function key to express social identity, show social status and express slight dissatisfaction, which represents a slight change in the social rules of "like" in Chinese social media.

Seo et al. (2019) also found that "like" on social media are used to indicate trust and approval, influencing people's perceptions of content and each other. This suggests that "like" are important for both social interaction and emotion management. However, while earlier research focused on the emotional impact of likes, my research also explored how Chinese students use likes to handle social situations and manage their own identity, such as when respondents pointed out that even if they did not like the content of the person's post, I had to "like" the person because he was my supervisor.

This difference may be due to the unique cultural background of Chinese users, who are influenced by group values that focus on harmony and relationship (Hofstede, 2001). In Chinese culture, people may pay more attention to how online interactions affect social connections, using "like" to maintain social harmony and show subtle social signals. My findings suggest that cultural norms play an important role in how people view and use social media, highlighting the need to better understand the impact of culture on online behaviour.

5.4 Overseas Students Responses and Perceptions

This study found that Chinese overseas students have special views and opinions on social media for different cultural experiences. In the interview, many interviewees said that when they first used Western social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, they felt out of place or uncertain. Because this is a different model from China's domestic social media platforms, in this uncertainty, they use Western media platforms more willing to browse and "like", for fear of saying the wrong thing to "smear" their country. Li and Tsai (2015) also found that international students often need time to adjust when using new social media platforms. This adaptation affects their online behaviour and online identity. However, this article also shows how Chinese overseas students use familiar domestic social platforms such as WeChat to maintain their cultural identity. This study finds

that on Chinese domestic social media platforms, they are not only more willing to use "like" to keep in touch with Chinese friends, but also more willing to use comments and share content, because Chinese domestic social media platforms give them a sense of belonging. While other research has focused on the challenges faced by international students, this study also shows how Chinese students actively use social media to manage their cultural identity. For example, many students said they created different profiles or used special privacy settings to deal with two identities, one related to their Chinese background and the other to their new country. This approach can help them better navigate different social environments and demonstrate a more flexible use of social media.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Summary of the Dissertation

This study focuses on how Chinese students view and use the "like" function on Chinese domestic social media platforms. This study not only focuses on how these "like" interactions affect their online identity and usage feelings, but also makes use of theories such as online identity and affective well-being. Through interviews and result analysis, the research not only finds out how Chinese overseas students use social media, but also finds out how they use social media. It also explores the feelings of Chinese students on social media under the unique Chinese cultural society. The results of the survey found that Chinese overseas students not only think that the "like" button on social media is a keyway to maintain and show social relationships, but also think that "like" is an important function to help them reconstruct their network. It not only reveals the behaviour and feelings of Chinese overseas students on the Internet, but also finds that the theory of online identity helps explain how Chinese overseas students manage their cultural background through their online identity. At the same time, the study also showed that whether Chinese overseas students received "likes" greatly affected their emotions. Getting a "like" usually makes them feel good, while not getting a "like" makes them feel rejected or not good enough. In addition, this study also found that the working ways of "like" on different Chinese social media platforms are also different.

6.2 Contribution

This study adds to the existing research by giving a detailed look at how Chinese international students use social media. It shows how their culture affects their online identity and feelings. The findings build on the theory of online identity by showing that cultural factors are important for how people present themselves online. This study also adds to the understanding of affective well-being. It shows how social media interactions, especially "like", affect emotions. This is influenced by cultural norms and expectations.

6.3 Limitations and Future Recommendations

While this study offers useful insights, it also has some limitations. The methods used in this study are qualitative. This means it might introduce personal bias. Participants' answers could be affected by their own views or the desire to please others (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2002). Future research should think about using quantitative methods. Surveys or experiments could help support the findings and make them more generalisable. Also, using personal networks and snowball sampling might limit the diversity of the sample. Future studies should use a sampling

strategy that includes a wider range of people. Further research could be expanded to include different groups. For example, including non-Chinese students could help us compare their social media behaviour and emotional responses with those of Chinese students. It would be useful to explore the impact of various social media platforms. This includes platforms that are not as popular among Chinese users (Kwak, Lee, Park and Moon, 2010). Doing so can provide a more complete view of digital behaviour across different cultures.

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