

Interaction and Communication of Chinese Teenagers on WeChat Social Media

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ABSTRACT

With the development of the Internet and social media, teenagers communicate with different types of people and establish interpersonal relationships on social media. Chinese teenagers, as a generation growing up under the influence of social media, are communicating and building relationships with different types of people on Chinese social media platforms. As one of the most popular social media platforms among Chinese teenagers, WeChat provides a platform for teenagers to communicate and interact with different types of people. The communication and relationship between teenagers and different objects are different from the traditional offline communication. The paper focused on how teenagers interact with others on WeChat, and whether the way they connect with people changes depending on the "type" of relationship.

Keywords: social media; teenager; online communication

1. INTRODUCTION

China has the largest number of Internet users and instant messaging users in the world, 1.011 billion and 983 million respectively, with instant messaging users accounting for 97.3% of the total Internet users [1]. Among them, the number of teenagers reached 183 million, and the Internet penetration rate was 94.9 percent, much higher than that of adults [1]. Even given that extraordinary penetration level, the number of Chinese Internet and instant messaging software users is still growing.

However, due to unique Internet policies, most of the more mature foreign social platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, cannot enter the Chinese market. In addition, due to different language environments, topic trends and culture, most Chinese use Chinese local social software [2]. Among those, WeChat, as China's leading instant messaging social platform, has become the social media platform with the most users in China through its comprehensive functions [3].

Since the start of COVID-19 in 2020, social distancing policies brought about by the pandemic have increased the number of active users by an average of 21% [2]. Internet users based on the network of life communication, work, and other needs increased. Teenagers, as part of the online population, have also seen

a sharp increase in the number of Internet users for similar reasons [1]. By the end of 2020, the combined monthly live accounts of WeChat stood at 1.225 billion, up 5.2% year on year [3]. Communication is one of the most common uses of social media by Chinese teenagers, accounting for 55 percent of their online activities [1]. WeChat has high popularity among teenagers, with more than 80% of them using it daily. Therefore, it is necessary to study the changes in teenagers' communication modes on WeChat [4]. Previously scholars have studied the correlations between social media use and teenagers' friendship. Few papers, however, have examined whether Chinese teens interact on Chinese social media differently depending on the level of their intimacy with those with whom they engage (stranger/friend/family). Therefore, this paper focuses on how teenagers interact with others on WeChat, and whether the way they contact people changes depending on the "type" of relationship.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The reconstruction of interpersonal relationships by social media

Personal relationships have been shown to correlate closely with intimacy on social media [5]. Media scholars have observed how social media is changing

communication between individuals and how they connect and build relationships [6]. With the development of social media platforms, the opportunities and frequency for people to interact on social networks and social media have increased significantly [7]. The development of social media has led to the popularization of interpersonal communication on the Internet, which is different from face-to-face and offline interpersonal communication in traditional society [8]. As people come to rely on online, social media-based communication, the way they interact is being changed and restructured [7]. The pattern by which people connect and communicate with each other through specific social media has been described in previous studies, namely that social media makes connections more frequent and it is easier to build relationships, strengthening social networks but weakening personal relationships [7,9].

2.2. Tie strength in social network relationships

Previous scholars have considered that the strength of ties in connection contributes to different results on the impact of social media on social relationships [10,11] It was Granovetter, an American scholar, who proposed the theory of the "weak ties hypothesis" [12]. Granovetter proposed four dimensions of connection intensity: time quantity, intimacy, intensity, and reciprocal service. Based on his theory, later studies on social networks determined that many other standards also measure tie strength, such as emotional support, the duration of contact, the closeness of the relationship, and the reciprocity [13]. Individuals maintain and form new connections with others, and interaction produces social networks. Connection is thought to exist between communicators, in the behavior of two individuals exchanging or sharing resources or information [12].

2.3. Tie-strength of online relationships

With the development of the Internet and social media, online relationships that are different from traditional offline communication have developed [8]. In studies on the strength of online relationships, researchers tend to continue to divide online relationships into strong and weak ones. Typically, strong ties form through direct interactions with relatives, close friends, and a significant other - and all of those offline connections can be cultivated online too. However, strong ties, even personal relationships, may also develop with strangers via online interactions. Scholars have also posited two kinds of weak relationships that may include interaction on the Internet: one is weak because the only relationship is a simple information exchange, and the other is a relationship consisting entirely of offline interaction [11,14].

Online relationships often include offline engagement. Although social media can provide new or alternative

offline relationships, the most common social model at present is still that online relationships complement offline relationships [15]. Depending on different kinds of relationships, people often create friend groups on social media, where the communication between the group members is shared, thus bringing the relationship closer [7]. Researchers have demonstrated that factors such as intensity, intimacy, duration, and emotional support in social media can positively influence emotional relationships between individuals and has different degrees of influence on different types of relationships [10,15]. For the stronger pairs, the degree of these traits was higher, with more intimacy in communication, more self-expression, more frequent interactions, longer duration, and so on [9]. Weak ties are easier to be built during connections between people since the cost of online interaction through social media is lower, and the use is more convenient [9].

2.4. Relationship strength of teenagers

Teenagers, as social media users, also have typical characteristics similar to those of overall users in their communication process. [16]. Intimate relationships in social media can shorten the emotional relationship between different individuals, have a positive impact on strong and weak ties, and expand the communication space of young people [17,18]. On social media, teenagers are particularly prone to establishing or developing social relationships with others since their real-life relationships and behaviors are more susceptible to online communication and contact [10]. Therefore, behaviors and connection strength on social media have also been studied, in which researchers discuss teenagers as a special group.

2.5. Social media use among Chinese teenagers in COVID-19

Teenagers are included in the 14-35 age group, which is the most active age range of social media users in China [3]. By 2021, the COVID-19 accelerated this trend. Due to the demand for online education and the growing need for school and personal/social communication, teenagers have become the most active users of social media [2]. Schools are using online classes to teach online: 89.9% of teenagers netizens regularly use the Internet for learning in 2020, further promoting Internet penetration in teenagers. While using social media is the leading online social communication activity for teenagers, accounting for 55.1% [1]. Teenagers are more willing to vent and express their emotions through social media to compensate for the negative feelings they felt under Covid [19].

However, previous studies on youth social media are mainly based on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media popular worldwide. There is a lack of studies about

teenagers on local social media in China. Therefore, the research objects of this paper choose Chinese teenagers to explore their ways of communicating and establishing social relations WeChat, and whether the way they contact people changes depending on the "type" of relationship.

Research questions:

RQ1: How do teenagers engage with others online on WeChat.

RQ2: Do the relationships and communication methods change depending on the "kinds" of friends/strangers they are connecting with?

3. METHODOLOGY

Most previous studies on teenagers' social media have looked at how teenagers "use" Facebook, Twitter, and other popular social networks worldwide. There is a lack of studies that look at how teenagers aged between 14-18 engage on the Chinese WeChat social media — the research objective of this paper. This study further focuses on the era of Covid-19, when social distancing policies brought about by the pandemic increased the number of active users by an average of 21% [2].

The aim of the study is to examine the communication styles and relationship strengths between different types of relationships that teenagers are exposed to, in order to determine how these relationships affect teenagers' communication styles. The survey method is used in this study. The target group of participants is youth in China, ideally aged under 25. Among them, those who do not use WeChat as a communication tool are excluded. The ideal participants should meet the following characteristics: 1) under 18 years of age. 2) are WeChat users. 3) use WeChat to communicate with others.

3.1. Sampling

The questionnaire was distributed on the WeChat platform from March 7th, 2022 to March 12th, 2022. A total of 126 online participants were collected for this survey, and the number of valid questionnaires was 111 after excluding invalid answers. Among the respondents, 64.86 percent were female. All the respondents of this questionnaire live in China, and most of them (68.47%) are teenagers. Of the 111 respondents, WeChat was the most commonly used social media platform, with 95.5 percent saying it was the most commonly used instant messaging social media. This reflects the way Chinese teenagers communicate with others on WeChat.

3.2. Survey

This survey aimed to obtain data on the communication styles and relationship strength between teenagers and the different types of people they encounter online to consider how teenagers' communication styles are affected by different types of relationships. A questionnaire was circulated online on March 7th, 2022. Respondents were asked to fill out a questionnaire that was divided into two parts. One demographic was to explore whether teens were communicating with a broader range of subjects. The questions included basic information about the respondents, such as age, gender, education level, social media platforms they usually used, etc. The other part was to test the way of communication the teenagers' social contacts on WeChat and the communication methods based on different types of social relationships. Questions were based on four aspects: time quantity, intimacy, intensity, and reciprocity, to measure the relation strength of teenagers' relationships with communication objects of different relationship types. The question also included their experience with social media, including time/frequency of use, perception of use, and communication style. Questionnaires were handled confidentially and anonymously.

4. FINDING

4.1. Basic Data

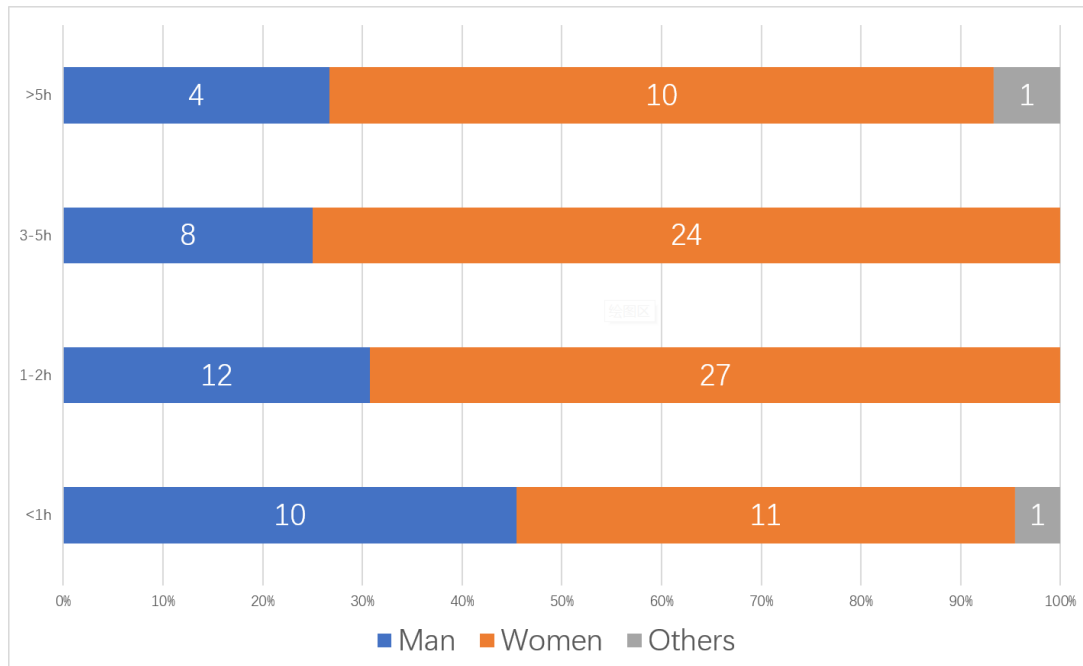


Figure 1: Daily social media usage by gender identity

As shown in Figure 1, in terms of daily social media use, 35.14% said they spend 1-2 hours a day on WeChat, followed by 3-5 hours a day at 28.8%, with 19.82% and 13.51% using WeChat for less than one hour and more than five hours. 95.5% said WeChat is the software they use most frequently. 65.77% of people use WeChat to hang it up or open it actively. As shown above, the data graph shows the relationship between gender groups and WeChat use time.

4.2. Communication frequency

According to the weak-ties hypothesis and other scholars, online interactions with relatives, close friends and the significant other belong to strong-ties

relationships, while online tie-strength with work associates or classmates and strangers are usually weak [12,14]. It is embodied in higher communication frequency and more exchange of emotional content between parents and close friends [7,9]. According to Table 1, teenager respondents communicated much more frequently with close friends and family than with work colleagues/classmates and strangers, which is consistent with previous theories. On the question of frequency of communication, on a scale of 1 to 5, a higher frequency of communication is assigned a higher score. Overall, a close friend or significant other was 3.8, followed by family at 3.6. The score of communication frequency of colleagues or classmates is 3.22, while the score of strangers is only 1.75.

Table 1: Frequency of online communication with people of different relationship types

	Barely	Seldom (1-3 times/wk)	Often (4-7 times/wk)	Usually (3-5 times/day)	Always (>5 times/day)	Don't add on WeChat	Average point
Families	6	16	41	16	28	4	3.41
Close friends/significant other	6	15	22	15	49	4	3.8
Classmates/work associates	8	24	32	15	24	8	3.22
Strangers	57	15	5	3	8	23	1.75

4.3. Composition of communication

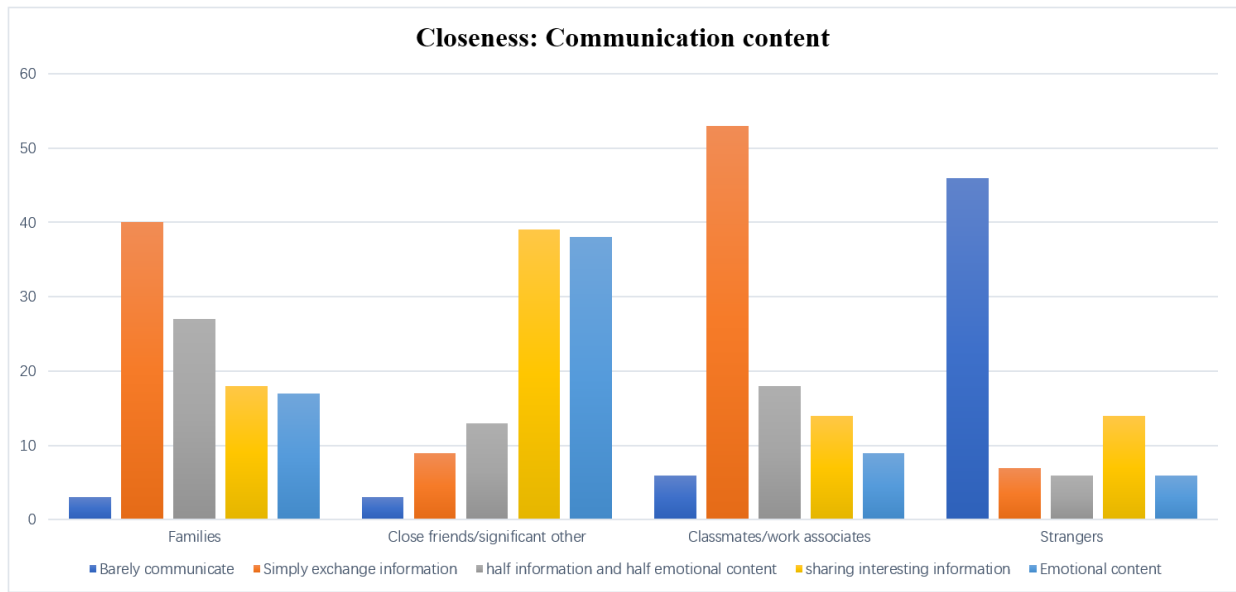


Figure 2: Online communication content with people of different relationship types

Figure 2 shows that in terms of communication content, the exchange of interesting information and emotional content accounted for 35.14% and 34.23% of the exchanges with close friends or significant others. Most of the communication with family members, or

36.04 percent, is about simply exchanging information. Accordingly, the score of emotional intensity is 3.06 for family members and 3.98 for close friends, which is much higher than that of family members.

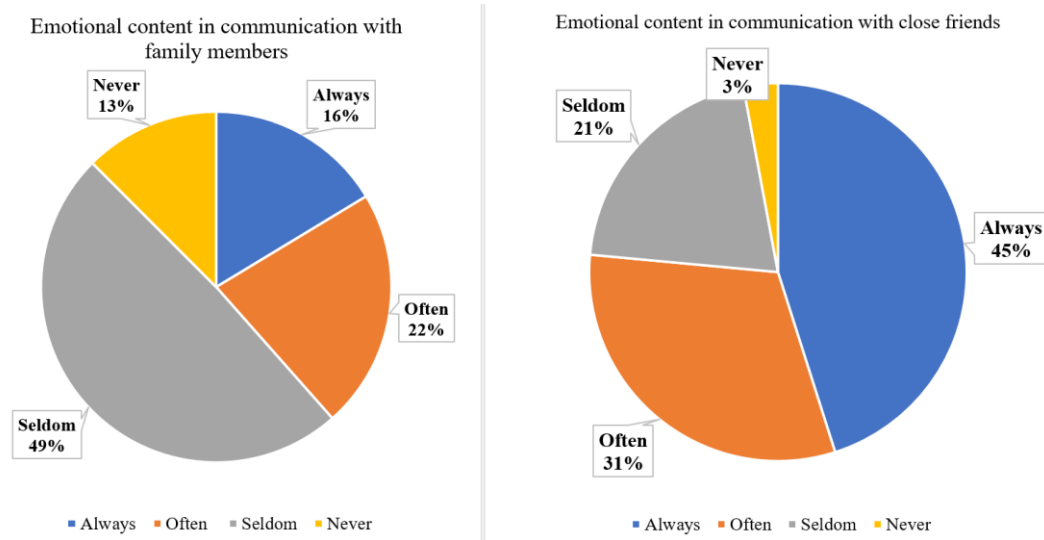


Figure 3: Frequency of sharing emotional content with family and close friends on WeChat

In previous offline communication studies, families and close friends are often classified as intimate relationships, because they have higher communication frequency and more emotional exchanges. In this study, although the frequency of communication with families and close friends is high on WeChat, the frequency of sharing emotional content with family members is relatively low. Most of them said they "mainly exchange information with families through WeChat", and the proportion of emotional content is relatively small.

4.4. Relationship with strangers online

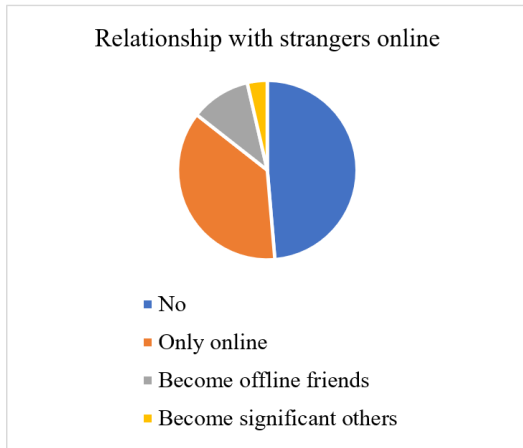


Figure 4: Development of relationships with strangers

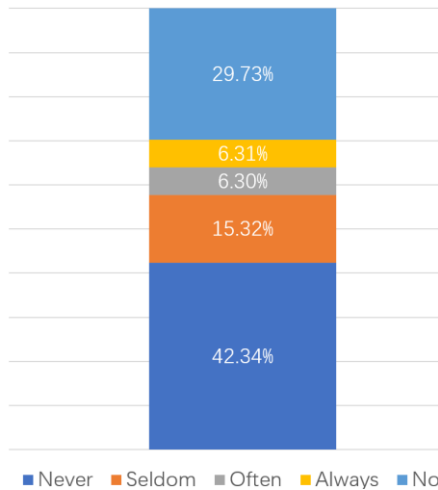


Figure 5 : Frequency of communication with strangers

As shown in Figure 5, more than half of Chinese teenagers have communicated or are currently communicating online on WeChat with others. Among them, 28.82% have more than 60% of their online friends on WeChat. However, most people avoid talking to strangers about their experiences or sharing exciting news online out of consideration for privacy. Some respondents said that because other types of relationships, such as close friends and family, can meet the need for emotional exchanges; Besides, it is hard to have enough topics for in-depth communication with strangers. Meanwhile, some respondents expressed concern about privacy and personal information. As a result, emotional exchanges with strangers account for very little of the whole communication content.

For a small number of people accustomed to online interaction, online relationships evolved into offline relationships, 45.05% said that online and offline relationships were equally important, adding to the intensity of their communication and leading to strong offline relationships. Sixteen people, accounting for 14.41%, choose to meet strangers online in real life, transforming their online relationships into offline ones. Four of them had online friends who became significant others. These people used to be strangers on the Internet but gradually became close followers through frequent interaction online and eventually formed a strong-ties relationship.

4.5. Using WeChat changes ways of offline communication

Table 2: Impact of WeChat communication on offline communication

Options	Completely Agree	Agree	I don't know	Disagree	Completely Disagree	Average Point
Using WeChat has changed the way I communicate offline	17	45	28	14	7	3.48
Using WeChat enlarge my social circle	19	41	19	17	10	3.4
After using WeChat, communication in the real-world increase	7	23	35	29	17	3.12

As for the subjective changes of WeChat in the way and scope of social contact, the questionnaire adopts the Richter scale, which is divided into five options ranging from completely agree to completely disagree. In Table 2, 5 points are given for completely agreeing and 1 point is given for completely disagreeing. Table 2 shows the three

hypotheses of "using WeChat has changed my offline communication mode", "using WeChat has expanded my social circle" and "after using WeChat, offline communication has increased" all scored high, above 3 points. In sum, respondents believe that WeChat has exerted an impact on social interaction, which is

embodied in expanding the number of friends, changing the way of offline communication and increasing offline communication

In general, the communication modes of Chinese teenagers aged 14-18 on WeChat mainly have the following characteristics:

1) The intensity of communication between teenagers and different types of people: two categories

One is family and close friends or significant others, who are strong-ties relationships online. Their communication has a high communication frequency, emotional communication frequency, and reciprocity degree. They tend to get to know each other offline. In offline communication, they also communicate more frequently and have a higher frequency of emotional communication. Whether online or offline, their communication is more active and more frequent, which is a combination of strong online and offline relationships.

Another category is work associates/classmates, and strangers. Teenagers' communication with them on what is characterized by a lower frequency of emotional exchange and reciprocity, and the content of the communication is mainly the exchange of simple information.

2) Less emotional communication with families

There are two factors that influence the emotional content in the communication between teenagers and their families:

FACTOR 1: In online communication, people can deliberately avoid some topics, while offline communication may combine signals such as body language. Therefore, offline face-to-face interpersonal communication can produce better communication effects [14,20]. Sharing emotional content often relies on ways with stronger communication effects. Therefore, many needs for emotional communication are met offline. At the same time, due to the distance policy brought by the epidemic, Chinese teenagers find it difficult to communicate with their close friends offline, which promotes teenagers' demand for emotional communication with close friends online, as offline emotional communication is conducted online.

FACTOR 2: Between the ages of 14 and 18, teenagers are going through puberty, during which they are emotionally intense and unstable, and their frequency of emotional communication with their parents decreases [21]. Many teens are looking for peers, or someone who understands them, to get more emotional contact [22]. This has to do with a decrease in emotional content in conversations with parents.

3) Change of the way teenagers interact with strangers online

Communication between strangers shows a rising

trend, more and more people begin to communicate with strangers online. However, due to privacy and other considerations, teenagers' communication with strangers tends to focus on simple information exchange online, and the communication frequency is low. Some teenagers (16%) choose to transform online relationships into offline ones, become offline friends, or become the significant other. These people gradually become close followers through interaction on WeChat and eventually form a strong-ties relationship.

5. LIMITATION

This study has limitations due to gender imbalance and living condition bias. First of all, the interviewees in this study are severely unbalanced by gender. Most of the interviewees are female, demonstrating a gender bias. Meanwhile, most of the respondents live in China's first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. In the future, it is hoped that future studies will include all teenagers in China and represent a more representative sample.

6. CONCLUSION

The study examined the way 14 - to 18-year-olds in China communicate with people of different types of relationships on the social media platform WeChat. WeChat can help broaden the scope of teenagers' communication, promote the further development of offline relationships and change the way of offline communication. Chinese teenagers aged 14-18 are less likely to communicate emotionally with their families, which is lower than the group of close friends with strong relationships. Teenagers' communication with strangers online is still more about simple information exchange, or just sharing interesting things. In general, only a small portion of people will choose to develop their online relationship into a more serious offline relationship, which is an example of the weak online relationship leading to the strong offline relationship.

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