

Social Media in Ethnographic Research: critical reflections on using WeChat in researching Chinese outbound tourists

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Abstract

This methodology paper aims to offer useful guidelines for adopting social media in ethnography by reflecting on the two authors' fieldwork experiences of using WeChat to investigate Chinese outbound tourists. The paper suggests social media as an effective tool to support data collection and analysis in ethnographic studies. Particularly, it helps to establish rapport with informants, collects various forms of data, assists in gaining a holistic understanding of the travel experience, makes good use of the fragmented time of participants to collect data, and improves the researcher's wellbeing and effectiveness during fieldwork. In addition, the paper highlights the importance of reflecting on the embedded culture while adopting social media in ethnographic fieldwork. Barriers and challenges to using social media in ethnographic fieldwork are also discussed. We propose six recommendations and suggestions for researchers who may consider using social media in ethnography.

Keywords:

WeChat, Qualitative Research, mobile ethnography, social media, reflexivity, Chinese outbound tourists

Introduction

Social media as a data collection tool in qualitative research has been discussed for around a decade (Postill & Pink, 2012; Sikkens et al., 2017), including its challenges (McKenna et al., 2017) and ethical considerations (Lunnay et al., 2015). These studies, however, mainly focus on discussing the use of social media to collect online-only data, such as netnography and online content analysis. With consumers today shifting between the virtual and corporeal world seamlessly, it is essential to broaden the discussion, and investigate how social media can function as a useful tool in ethnographic fieldwork, which consists of both online and offline data. This is particularly important for conducting ethnographic fieldwork on digitally active communities. Understanding how to leverage social media as an effective tool to collect and analyse data is important to gain a holistic understanding of the culture and experience of the researched community.

In the tourism context, the discussion of using social media as a research tool in collecting and analysing qualitative data is limited. With the new mobilities paradigm, mobile ethnography has become an effective research strategy in tourism studies to understand travel communities that are on the move. Compared with other qualitative approaches, mobile ethnography requires the researcher to immerse in the research setting, and collect various forms of data to gain a thick description (Cai, 2018). Using social media to collect online data is not new in ethnographic fieldwork, especially when the informants are digitally active, or the virtual world plays an important part in their experience. However, the use of social media as a data collection tool should not be taken for granted, and requires a more systematic reflection. Social media has several features and potential functions to collect, store and analyse the data, although they were not designed initially for the purpose of data collection. Therefore, these potentials and challenges should be systematically discussed and reflected to maximise the potential, and use them effectively as a research tool.

In this article, we aim to reflect on the use of social media in ethnographic tourism research with a particular focus on the cultural element - the core of ethnography, which has often been neglected in studies discussing the adoption of social media as a research tool. We reflect on the context of Chinese outbound tourists, and reflect on the use of WeChat to gain a deep reflection of the cultural element, and how the use of social media helps to explore this aspect. With more than 1 billion users globally, WeChat is the most popular social media in China and one of the most used platforms in the world. In addition, the tech-savviness of Chinese outbound tourists warrants our discussion on the use of social

media in ethnographic research to be relevant and significant (Xiang, 2013). However, apart from some exceptions (Ma et al., 2020; Skavronskaya et al., 2020), research on how using WeChat qualitatively can advance a holistic understanding of Chinese travellers' experiences is overlooked. The paper will address the gap by providing a detailed account of reflection on using WeChat as a social media tool in ethnographic fieldwork.

This paper aims to discuss the advantages, challenges and issues of using WeChat as an effective tool in qualitative research, in particular by articulating details of how it is applied to ethnographic studies considering cultural contexts. With the discussion developing, the paper will examine the Chinese cultural perspective in affecting ethnographic studies (Sie 2016). The study not only provides contextual contributions to using WeChat in understanding Chinese outbound tourists and the embedded culture in ethnography, but also contributes to a much wider methodological understanding of using social media in a mobile ethnographic context by providing guidelines for qualitative researchers.

Literature Review - *The emergence of Wechat in research*

The development of digital technology has broadened the scope and reach of ethnography studies. By moving ethnographic studies online, netnography (Kozinets, 2019) has departed from ethnography's original root in anthropology, and has been applied widely in various disciplines and fields, including tourism (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). Comparing with the traditional ethnography, netnography is less intrusive and more time-effective, offering opportunities to engage in understanding online communities, cultures, and behaviours (Kulmala et al., 2013). With the recent development of mobile technologies and social media, and the blurred boundaries between the physical and virtual space, the application of netnography has expanded and integrated with other methods to explore the complexity of modern lives (Cai et al., 2019).

Proposing the term 'netnographic sensibility', Reid and Duffy (2018) differentiated netnography from online content analysis by emphasising the importance of human immersion to form in-depth cultural understanding through a technocultural perspective. In addition, Reid and Duffy (2018) also suggested the importance of triangulation with other sources of data to strengthen the understanding of the phenomenon. From the perspective of feminist and queer theory, Cousineau et al. (2019) proposed the term 'appnography' to queer digital ethnographic research, particularly geosocial networking

applications. They emphasised the importance of understanding the blurred and intertwining nature of the hybrid offline-online digital space, the embedded power structure in the application design and the user practices, and the situated contextual and temporal frames where the app operates, and the interactions take place. In addition, Cousineau et al. (2019) also highlighted the significance of reflexivity throughout the process of undertaking digital ethnography.

Launched in 2011 by the Chinese multinational company Tencent Holding Limited, WeChat is now the most popular social media application in China. WeChat had 1.26 billion active users in Q1 2022, with the average user spending 82 minutes each day on WeChat (Iqbal, 2022). Over the past decade, the functions of WeChat have gone beyond features of chatting and private messaging and posting photos and videos, and include popular features and services such as cashless payment, search engine, article sharing, bookings for holidays, transportation and doctor appointments, and paying for traffic fines in metropolitan areas of China. WeChat, therefore, has evolved as a multi-purpose app that is highly integrated into every aspect of Chinese people's life, and has played a significant role in transforming Chinese digital society in the last decade. The version for users of mainland China is called Weixin (微信), while WeChat serves overseas users. In this article, we do not differentiate the two versions in our discussion of their roles in research ('WeChat' is used inclusively).

The design of WeChat has reflected several Chinese characteristics. Vodanovich et al. (2017) emphasised that the affordances of WeChat's features facilitate the maintenance and practice of Chinese traditional values such as keqi, respect for authority, and guanxi. Skavronskaya et al. (2020) also suggested that the social functions of WeChat highly reflect the Chinese 'circle culture', which includes both strong ties within the small 'inner circle' and with the circle getting bigger, the tie becomes weaker (Holmes et al., 2015). The features such as the mutual authentication mechanism to access each other's accounts, and privacy setting in WeChat Moment ('Friend Circle' in Chinese translation) afford Chinese people to practice the 'inner circle' in the digital world; whilst the group chat function maintains the weak ties, but with limited access to each other's contents. According to Cheng et al. (2017), among the five types of trust, calculative-based trust plays a salient role in different types of WeChat communication, including interpersonal communication and group communication. The perceived high benefits and low costs, such as valuable information, convenience and perceived friendship are the considerations when individuals decide to communicate through the social media site WeChat (Cheng et al., 2017). Luqiu and Kang (2021) analysed nuanced reasons for overseas Chinese heavily rely on the use of WeChat. From the micro-level, they found that maintaining contacts with relatives and friends from their home country,

assisting with navigating new environments and foreign culture, accessing local information in the Chinese language and acquiring public knowledge from other Chinese immigrants.

With its popularity in China, WeChat as a research topic has been investigated in various disciplines. However, studies discussing using WeChat as a research tool are limited. With its strong consumer base and powerful features, WeChat has great potential to generate and capture various forms of rich online data. Sie et al. (2016) discussed WeChat as a remote research tool to capture in situ data to understand banking with Chinese consumers by using mobile dairies. Sie et al. (2016) also highlighted that the chat function offers an open space to encourage conversations, and to follow up with participants in future enquiries. Having a social wall (WeChat Moment) integrated into WeChat also allows for collecting data in a natural setting. Making good use of the mini-programme in WeChat, Sun et al. (2016) developed an in-app questionnaire to understand female pelvic floor disorder. Having a questionnaire on smartphone devices rather than a large-screen computer or traditional paper-administrated formats, Sun et al. (2016) argued that the WeChat-based survey not only helps to rich wide geographical coverage, but also protects participants' privacy when the research topic is sensitive. Leveraging the voice call and messaging features on WeChat, Weil et al. (2020) conducted a health-related survey to understand how older adults experience aging. By 'adding friends' with participants, WeChat's voice-call functions help to collect additional data that might be lost.

In the tourism context, Ma et al. (2020) and Skavronskaya et al. (2020) provided detailed reflections on using WeChat as a research tool in qualitative studies. Ma et al. (2020) discussed the great potential of using WeChat for surveying time-poor travellers. The benefits such as flexibility for both researchers and participants, improving researchers' wellbeing by alleviating anxiety, and building a trusting relationship with participants have been highlighted. Using WeChat to collect qualitative data to understand memorable tourism experiences, Skavronskaya et al. (2020) suggested the multi-functionalities of WeChat allow for collecting both visual and textual data from both pre-existing user-generated content and in-depth primary qualitative data through a deep engagement with participants. In addition, both Ma et al. (2020) and Skavronskaya et al. (2020) emphasised the reward system on WeChat by sending a thank-you emoji or 'red envelope' incentives that are effective to reward participants and sustain a long-term relationship with participants.

Limitations and challenges of using WeChat as a research tool were also identified (Ma et al., 2020; Skavronskaya et al., 2020). First, accessing or establishing the 'inner circle' could be challenging in the

initial stage, which is essential to collect data from WeChat. Second, the users of WeChat are still predominately Chinese; it could be challenging to use WeChat for data collection in other contexts, or understand other communities. Third, some affordance constraints of WeChat, such as audio message limits (60 seconds) and group size (500 member maximum), might cause limitations when collecting data. Fourth, as common limitations of online studies, there are limitations of credibility of data collected, as participants might not reveal their true selves in the online setting (Hogan, 2010).

Different from netnography developed solely on the Internet (Markham, 2013; Postill & Pink, 2012) or published studies in ethnography based on WeChat in the Chinese language (Sha, 2018; Tang & Shao, 2017); this study systematically summarised how social media assist researchers in conducting holistic ethnographic research. The authors believe that neither completely online nor completely offline would benefit the understanding of Chinese outbound tourists. The analysis of visual material as well as using social media as a tool in fieldwork are important parts of modern ethnography.

Setting the scene

The paper reflects on the two authors' fieldwork experiences in which WeChat was adopted respectively when researching Chinese outbound tourists on the move, one in Europe and one in Australia. A reflexive approach is applied to provide a critical reflection of WeChat use during the ethnographic research fieldwork. We were born and raised in China, and completed our postgraduate studies in tourism programmes in Western countries. The cross-cultural work and life experiences enable us first-hand insights into Chinese culture, outbound tourism patterns and tourists' behaviour; meanwhile we are also well-trained in research methodologies during their doctoral studies. Both of us were, therefore, reflexive about ourselves as researchers and our own situations during ethnographic research (Dowling, 2000; Mason, 2017).

The authors' field reflection 1 examines how WeChat was used in a holistic approach to establishing rapport and record participants' virtual movement through a 'follow the people' (Marcus, 1995) technique, as well as how netnography collected through WeChat can be merged effectively in mobile ethnography (Cai et al., 2019). The authors' field reflection 2 discusses the use of WeChat to mitigate challenges during data collection especially given the pressures faced by tourists and researchers for the

interview. By acknowledging the awkwardness of ethnographic experiences (Koning & Ooi, 2013), it narrates how the social media app helped to achieve research outcomes.

The critical and reflexive reflections will lead to the discussion on how ethnographic research on Chinese outbound tourists can gain benefits from the adoption of WeChat - an 'everyday-must-use' app in China. Reflections on using social media to research mobilities and culture will generate recommendations and guidance for future research.

Authors' field reflection 1

In this section, I will reflect on the use of WeChat in my PhD fieldwork. In my PhD research between 2013 and 2017, I conducted mobile ethnography to understand Chinese backpackers' experiences in Europe. In this fieldwork, I recruited participants through online travel forums, and travelled together with them as a group. Both netnography and multi-site ethnography were conducted. WeChat was used as a tool throughout the data collection process.

First, to obtain a rich description and in-depth understanding of the informants' lived experiences, I needed to establish a strong sense of trust with them and be part of the community (Skavronskaya et al., 2020). The 'inner circle' and personal ties embedded in traditional Chinese culture play a significant part in everyday interactions and interpersonal relationships. Chinese people, thus, tend to be sceptical and indifferent towards people outside their 'inner circle', but supportive and trusting towards people within their 'inner circle'. This cultural characteristic embeds in the design of WeChat (Vodanovich et al., 2017). To connect on WeChat, a friend request needs to be accepted. WeChat users have the autonomy to decide what content is visible to each specific friend. Accessing the inner circle of informants, therefore, is the key not only to establishing a trusting relationship with participants as an 'insider', but also to offering access to personal User-Generated Content (UGC) data.

The functionalities of WeChat enable the ethnographer to access a relatively closed community in a short period of time. The group chat feature functioned as an effective tool to establish rapport with informants at the early stage of mobile ethnography. After successfully recruiting informants and forming the travel group from Qyer.com – one of the biggest Chinese backpacker forums, group chats were created. At this stage, I, as a researcher, could establish rapport by getting familiar with my informants, and engaging with the trip planning through the chat feature on WeChat. Informants could also get to know each other better through online chatting and planning. In the early stages of

ethnography, informants tended to be cautious of the researcher's presence (Bryman, 2003), and some relationships between the ethnographer and the informants took time to develop. Chinese outbound travellers tend to have shorter holidays compared with their Western counterparts, so the time is limited and precious for mobile ethnographers in the field to immerse with the researched group to develop the 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973a). WeChat bought time in the pre-trip stage to establish rapport, and I could enter the field with a strong level between the informants and myself. The features of WeChat, such as stickers, emojis, and post-sharing in the group chat, afford a friendly and engaging platform for me to communicate with my informants. Through participating in the trip planning, I soon gained trust from my informants, and a few days after joining the group chats, they no longer made jokes of me being a researcher 'spying' on their behaviours; instead, they considered me as one of them by involving me into lots of details of trip planning and assigning me tasks. Some participants started to change their settings on WeChat Moments to be visible to me. Such a shift reflected the result of effective rapport building, as I was considered as a member of their 'inner circle'. In addition, I also had access to genuine, non-instructive UGC data from their WeChat Moments. The group chat function of WeChat thus assisted me in entering the informants' 'inner circle', and building our own backpacker community in the pre-trip stage. The sense of community is the essential foundation to obtain credible and in-depth accounts in the fieldwork.

Throughout my PhD, I operated as an insider ethnographer (O'Reilly, 2008), which has the advantage in terms of participant access, material interpretations, and obtaining knowledge. As there is a distinct boundary between insider and outsider in the Chinese context (Wei & Li, 2013), being in the inner circle is essential for collecting trustworthy data. As a person who shares similar demographic background and passion for backpacking, I had the advantage of being an 'insider' in a relatively short period of time. However, I would not have been able to establish such strong connections in a short period of time without WeChat's assistance. The recruitment of participants itself would be challenging in the actual fieldwork during the trip without bonding and trip planning with informants in the pre-trip stage, let alone accessing them as an insider for the rest of the fieldwork. In addition, the actual fieldwork had a transformative effect in establishing a stronger bond between the researcher and the informants, which I find difficult to achieve in pure netnography for its absence of extensive embodied experiences.

Second, the multiple functions of WeChat extend and expand the scope of the fieldwork. With the assistance of WeChat, the data collection stage in the mobile ethnography has no longer been limited to the 'during the trip' stage. I was also able to collect data in the pre, and post-trip stages of the trip. This

helps to gain a full, holistic picture of the backpacker's journey. WeChat was used as a predominating tool in data collection before and after the trip, and a supporting tool during on-site mobile ethnography. Before the trip, data was mostly collected through the chat group in the process of trip planning and arrangement. WeChat provided a platform for me to document informants' perceptions of the destination, the subtle changes in group dynamics, and the process of planning and decision-making. After the trip, WeChat was also the main platform for informants to reflect on and share their travel experiences through the forms of WeChat Moment posts and public account articles. During the trip, although participant observations and interviews were the main research techniques in the fieldwork, data collected through WeChat in this stage was essential to triangulate and validate the data. The UGC was used as an elicitation for the formal interviews. WeChat also facilitated the collecting of a wide range of data in the form of texts, images, videos, and voice messages. The multiple functions of WeChat afforded gathering data from both UGC and group chats in an organic way, and a more staged and purposive manner, such as conversational or formal interviews through voice messages or video calls.

Third, WeChat use was an essential part of backpackers' experience. The design of WeChat with multiple functions such as maps, eWoM platforms and booking systems for transport, accommodations, and restaurants made it the 'go-to' app for informants. Data collected from WeChat is an essential piece of the puzzle in mobile ethnography to obtain a comprehensive understanding of my informants' behaviour and travel experience. Collecting data from WeChat not only offered an in-depth understanding of informants' online behaviour during the trip, but also a new aspect to understand and make sense of the ethnographic accounts and strengthen the trustworthiness of the data (Decrop, 2004). For instance, I often recorded rather different experiences with the same event when comparing participant observations, conversational interviews, and their posts on WeChat Moments. The different behaviours between online and corporeal environments allowed me to further investigate the complex reasoning and underlying cultural influences in the semi-structured interview. Collecting netnographic data such as WeChat Moment posts and group chats from WeChat helped to triangulate the mobile ethnography, thus not only providing a better understanding of my informants' experience, but also ensuring the trustworthiness of the data. In addition, virtual and corporeal experiences are intertwined and influence each other. During the trip, the advice and recommendations from WeChat constantly influenced the informants' itineraries and perceptions, whilst the informants visited certain landmarks or attractions just to 'check-in' on WeChat.

Fourth, WeChat has been highly integrated into various aspects of the trip, and its role cannot be neglected when writing the 'thick description' of the ethnography (Geertz, 1973b). In this case, WeChat has functioned as an effective assistant for data collection and analysis. From a practical perspective, the various features of WeChat effectively support me as an ethnographer in the field to have seamless communication with my informants. WeChat was used to allocate each other, share photos and videos in the group chats, and communicate trip details such as sending ticket numbers and reservation screenshots. In the post-trip stage, WeChat is very effective to schedule and conduct follow-up virtual interviews, and send a virtual thank-you through the 'red envelope'. In addition, WeChat also allows us to maintain a close relationship after the trip to witness the long-term transformative effect of the trip. From WeChat, I could observe that some informants have developed close relationships from the study and travelled together for different trips, whilst some have implemented knowledge and skills they have learned from the trip in different contexts. This has led to the potential for longitudinal studies. WeChat is also very user-friendly in terms of storing and exporting data. With features such as 'convert voice messages to text', it saved lots of time for data transcriptions. WeChat, as a functional tool used in various contexts throughout the trip, should be considered an essential element of mobile ethnography to understand the cultural influence on technology use (McKenna et al., 2018).

Authors' field reflection 2

Employing WeChat as part of my investigation was not my first conscious choice, but rather a natural continuation of contemporary forms of communication based on the understanding of Chinese outbound tourists, and especially the 'awkward encounters' (Koning & Ooi, 2013) during my fieldwork when collecting data for my PhD between 2017 and 2019. My research aimed to explore how Chinese tourists' socio-cultural background influences travel experiences at a world heritage site in Australia. Semi-structured interviews (30 minutes to one hour) and observations were designed to be suitable data collection methods for the study. Participants were recruited in multiple ways - handing out brochures at the heritage site reception and a local souvenir shop in town; as well as through a convenient and snowballing sampling approach by sharing a poster on my WeChat with friends. In total, 19 Chinese tourists were contacted and connected, which was an ideal size for this study. However, these potential participants were not always receptive to responding to my interview requests, although most of them showed genuine desires to assist with my study, and many were interested in my research

topic and researchers' identity – being a fellow Chinese working and studying in an Australian destination.

McGehee (2012) argued that tourists who actively engage in travel activities are willing to share their time and would be eager to discuss travel experiences with researchers. However, for most Chinese tourists I encountered, this is more an exception than the norm. For the vast majority, time for travel is limited. This is especially prominent for Chinese tourists heading overseas. Many Chinese outbound tourists travel with an abundant budget but lack adequate time at a destination; consequently, they would attempt to see as much as possible within each day's itinerary (Ma et al., 2018). At the time of the data collection phase, I faced a dilemma. It was a struggle for me to make up my mind on whether I should allow my recruited participants to enjoy themselves on holiday, or chase after them to make available time for being interviewed about their travel experiences. Being a fellow Chinese, I understand the context. I might be very 'intruding' by approaching my participants to take time and have a sit-down interview with me. I felt self-conscious infringing on their valuable private time and space during my fieldwork. I acknowledged my awkward and uncomfortable feelings and positions in the field (Koning & Ooi, 2013).

After the first few attempts, I found it was impossible to interview at the heritage site or find another place such as a café. I then discovered that WeChat was very helpful for conducting my interviews. Actually, it appeared to be very helpful in every stage of my data collection when reflecting on my fieldwork diary that includes the decision-making process, observations, thoughts, feelings and emotions. According to Käihkö (2020), for ethnography, digital social medium selection matters. WeChat was recognized as a practical tool to assist data collection because of its popularity in China and the functionalities of the application.

WeChat made my fieldwork much easier and more efficient: from disseminating the research, sharing invitation letters on WeChat Moment and group chats, to obtaining informed consent after selecting participants who met the criteria to be informants, to interviewing. For interviews especially, WeChat offers ultimate flexibility (from my participants' perspective). Participants were empowered to select among hold-to-talk voice messaging, text messaging, and audio or video chatting functions that suit them the best. None has opted to use video chat functions. Participants might not have felt they were part of my 'inner circle' of acquaintanceship to chat intimately, yet digitally face-to-face. Instead, most interviewees appreciated the flexible way of being interviewed. I sent them a couple of interview

questions to start with, the participants then would spend their fragmented time, such as waiting for tour bus pick up or downtime between tour activities, to reply to me, on their own rhythm, notwithstanding Wi-fi and data network coverage that also mattered. After completion of the interviews, words and emojis were used to express my gratitude, as 'red packets' (a function in WeChat to transfer cash amounts less than 200 yuan) incentives were not permitted by my institution. The final function that WeChat served was data triangulation by accessing their WeChat Moments posts and photographs about their travel experiences. The credibility of information obtained through interview data was examined by assessing the sources from their posted stories and pictures.

In summary, Chinese outbound tourists are very tech-savvy but lack adequate travel time. These characteristics provide both challenges and opportunities for researchers to collect data during fieldwork. Utilising the time gaps and adopting WeChat other than committing to an hour interview turned out to be favourable for my participants. It meanwhile alleviated my anxiety in the field. Social media thus provided a convenient tool for me to 'squeeze into' their travel itinerary to collect data.

Discussion

Embedded culture in ethnography involving WeChat

Ethnography studies should be situated on a deep understanding of the culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). A good understanding of Chinese outbound tourists will only be possible if the embedded Chinese culture is closely examined. Building on Reid and Duffy's (2018) technocultural perspective, we argue that how the cultural aspect of WeChat in facilitating the understanding of the characteristics of Chinese tourists should be articulated. Based on our fieldwork reflections and relevant literature, we, therefore, summarised the following four aspects of embedded culture in ethnography involving WeChat. Although these four aspects are deeply rooted in WeChat use and Chinese culture, they can be transferable in understanding using social media in other contexts.

First, many Chinese outbound tourists are anxious and travel fast-paced (Ma et al., 2018) due to culture shock, scepticism towards people outside the 'inner circle', and limited annual leaves. Consequently, they found themselves lacking time or unwilling to participate in research. WeChat, in this case, offers alternative options for data collection that make good use of fragmented time of participants to collect data through conversational interviews via means such as voice messages. This is less intrusive and less

time-consuming for participants. The ethnographer can also build rapport with participants through WeChat instead of having the pressure to establish a trusting relationship in a short period of time.

Second, Chinese tourists are highly influenced by the collectivistic Chinese culture, where *guanxi* and strong personal ties play an important role in social interactions. This collective social practice could pose challenges for researchers to obtain genuine and trustworthy data in the fieldwork. Our reflections emphasised that effective use of the WeChat group chat function in the early stage of the fieldwork can help to build the personal relationship between the researcher and informants. For example, trust can be established through transparency by revealing our identity and Moment content. Once rapport is built, willingness to talk to acquaintances can also be different in WeChat. It facilitates the open-ended nature of the ethnographic relationship. In addition, for fieldwork that involves several informants, the group chat feature initiates a space for informants to get to know other better.

Third, influenced by a complex traditional Chinese value of maintaining relations - *guanxi* (Montag et al., 2018), Chinese tourists tend to share their travel photographs and short diaries with their friends and families regularly when travelling to report safety and share happy memories (McKenna et al., 2018). WeChat Moment, with various functionalities of sharing photos, texts, short video clips, and articles, allows informants to share their travel experiences with their 'inner circles'. With access to the informants' WeChat Moment, the researcher will have access to personal and authentic user-generated data, which is an important field site in the netnography (Kozinets, 2019).

Fourth, reciprocity and gifting culture play an important part in the everyday lives of Chinese people. WeChat facilitates a smooth and easy way to show gratitude to participants through sending emojis and red envelopes. Red envelope has strong Chinese cultural roots, and has been digitalised with the popular adoption of WeChat. The red envelope feature in WeChat functions as an effective rewarding system (Skavronskaya et al., 2020) for the researcher to show gratitude for participants' time, and maintain a long-lasting relationship for future data collection after the trip has finished.

Barriers and challenges of using WeChat for research

In our reflection, although WeChat was very useful in assisting data collection and analysis in the ethnographic fieldwork, we also identified four main barriers and challenges. Firstly, the detachment of time and space in today's liquid modern society (Bauman, 2000; Harvey, 1989) should be acknowledged.

Tourists, in this case, practice the network sociality that is de-localised, hypermobile, and (re)assembled in dynamic configuration (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Wittel, 2001). Without a stable relationship with spatiality, a critical understanding of the temporal dimension is essential. When using WeChat in ethnographic fieldwork, the temporal information of certain posts or online behaviours, which is fundamentally disordered, can be difficult to trace and follow up (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). As a result, it would fail in its purpose to support the sense-making process of the holistic experiences of tourists. However, according to Atkinson et al. (2008), it is significantly important to incorporate a multimodal approach to gain a holistic understanding of the enactments and interrelations between bodies, space, discourse and materials to have a richer and more sophisticated analysis of the social organisation. From Atkinson et al.'s (2008) interpretive sociological approach towards ethnography, WeChat as a social media, and the online data gathered from WeChat function as an essential layer to understanding social and cultural lives. Although such issues are challenging to address, the researcher can be mindful of this issue through data collection, and gather additional contextual information related to temporality (Cousineau et al., 2019), such as engaging in follow-up interviews to verify the timeline of certain events with participants.

Secondly, although WeChat has broadened the scope of data collection, various forms of data also increase the complexity and challenges of managing and analysing the data. We believe that these different forms of data should not be treated as a whole in the analysis. Instead, we value the importance of the situated context where the data was generated and collected; this includes the involvement of the researcher in the data generation, the online or physical environment where data was collected, and the ethical and quality considerations of data collection and storage. When travelling, tourists move in between the physical and virtual spaces, which makes it more challenging to understand the context. Researchers, in this case, might need to go beyond where the data was generated, and understand the supplementing virtual/physical context to make sense of the situation. This approach should also be applied in writing and presenting the findings. Although this creates lots of additional work and complexity for data analysis, it is necessary to maintain a thick description of the ethnography.

Thirdly, with the fast development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the centralization of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in China, the censorship system and content moderation for social media have become very comprehensive and sophisticated (Xu, 2018; Zeng et al., 2022). According to

Tai & Fu (2020), content on WeChat public articles with certain terms and textual units may be suppressed by the censors. Data security and state control of using social media are concerns for many users, including researchers (King et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2020). Regardless of the circumstances that tourists may create a digital identity and present themselves differently within the online space (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Goffman, 1959), due to the censorship concern, some informants may want to avoid certain topics or interview questions when interacting with researchers on social media. For us, we did not raise concern over this issue when researching Chinese tourists' experiences – a topic which contains minimal sensitivity; while it does not indicate that effective communication of all tourism research would not be affected in WeChat. Due to such regulations, participants might not be able to share their experiences freely through WeChat.

Fourthly, Li (2020) argued that some people nowadays are less likely to use WeChat during holidays, and are unwilling to share WeChat Moment posts about their travel status and photos. In recent years, increasing numbers of people have started to be aware of their digital wellbeing and practice digital minimalism or detox on holidays (Floros et al., 2019) to draw a clearer boundary between work and leisure, and to be fully recharged (Cai et al., 2020). This trend is also reported in the Chinese context (Zhang & Zhang, 2022). Therefore, there is a barrier to using social media to collect data from participants who want to minimise their technology use on holiday.

Implications

The discussion of the embedded culture and challenges of using WeChat is highly situated in the context of Chinese society. However, the transferable implication of using social media in ethnographic research can go beyond the use of WeChat and the Chinese context. To develop these transferable implications, we further synthesise our contextualised reflections, and focus on cultural influence, social interactions, the affordance of social media, and the researchers' relationship with them in conducting ethnography. In addition, although WeChat is a multi-purpose app with various features and functions, most of them can find equivalence in other social media. This section thus provides recommendations and suggestions to illustrate how to use other social media ethnographic research in different contexts.

First, differing from other qualitative methods, ethnography requires the researcher to fully immerse in the research setting to obtain a detailed, in-depth account. This requirement poses challenges for researchers. The 'social' element of social media provides solutions for the researcher to establish a

trusting relationship with informants at the early stage of the ethnography. By establishing a strong rapport with informants at the early stage, the researcher is more likely to be considered as an 'insider', and part of the research community; this lays a strong foundation for collecting trustworthy data. Therefore, the researcher should make good use of features such as group chats to establish rapport when using social media as a research tool in ethnographic studies.

Second, each social media has its unique features and functionalities. The potential of these functions in data collection should be fully recognised and justified when choosing them as tools for supporting ethnographic data collection. The researchers should choose the social media that is highly adopted by the research community or can collect the most valuable data. In the case of WeChat, the app has many features, and they can be adjusted accordingly to collect certain types of data depending on the situation. This requires the researcher to have a thorough research design: on the one hand, understanding all the potential data that could be collected from this social media; on the other hand, flexibly applying the most suitable features to collect data in each situation.

Third, when using social media as a research tool in tourism ethnography fieldwork, the researcher should not only consider social media as a separate channel to collect online data; instead, social media should be considered together with other research tools strategically and holistically in the research design to obtain a full picture of the researched setting and community. Social media, in this case, can take either a leading or supporting role in the data collection. Due to its advantages of collecting non-intrusive data in its natural setting, it can play an important role to triangulate other forms of research design, such as interviews, or provide a new dimension of interpretation. In addition, the use of social media can extend the 'fieldwork' beyond the conventional understanding of 'field', and allow collecting data in the pre and post-stages.

Fourth, using social media as a tool when conducting ethnographic fieldwork should not detach from the embedded cultural characteristics of the researched community. Some features of social media can be leveraged to cope with challenges coming from the researched community, collect culturally informed data, add values to research group dynamics, or meet certain practices from informants. The researcher can also choose suitable social media as a research tool based on the embedded cultural element of the researched community.

Fifth, as an essential part of knowledge production, the researcher's wellbeing should not be overlooked in ethnography (Kuiper, 2021; O'Gorman et al., 2014). As stated previously, researchers experience

anxieties varying from time constraints from collecting on-site data to the 'awkward encounters' of interviewing a participant who is not part of the researcher's 'inner circle'. These emotional challenges are not specific to researching Chinese outbound tourism. The complex emotional entanglements faced by ethnographers during fieldwork, which often affect research practices, have been discussed in various tourism contexts (Witte et al., 2022). Having social media as a medium to establish rapport and take away some practical pressure of gaining access to tourist communities helps to reduce anxieties for the researcher.

On the other hand, social media affords the researcher to report their safety, and stay in contact with their friends and families during the fieldwork that requires the researcher to be physically away from their usual locations of home or workplace. WeChat, for example, supports sharing personal real-time locations in chats. This form of challenges, such as sexual(lised) harassment and assault during ethnographic fieldwork, are not uncommon (Kloß, 2017). Having another layer of assurance further alleviates researchers' anxiety in the field. In addition to functioning as a data collection tool, social media's potential features of storing, managing, and analysing data can be leveraged to support the fieldwork. In this sense, social media is also an effective 'research assistant' that carries the 'data' baggage during the fieldwork. As such, the adoption of social media in ethnographic research alleviates fieldwork stresses, and consequently improves researchers' both mental and physical wellbeing.

Sixth, since the outbreak of the Coronavirus in early 2020, the way people travel, and how tourism researchers conduct fieldwork has changed significantly, which poses challenges for traditional qualitative methods such as ethnography that require close contact with informants. Although it cannot replace traditional ethnography, the use of social media does offer a good alternative for field study. Thanks to the well-developed functionalities of social media, various forms of data ranging from text, images, audio and videos can be collected. Both user-generated data and specific data through a research setting can be collected through social media. Instead of requiring a dedicated slot for interviews, using social media also has the flexibility to collect data through fragmented time.

Concluding remarks

Conducting fieldwork needs to be practical, ethical and safe for both participants and researchers. Social media offers opportunities to achieve this outcome. In this study, we unpacked various roles that social

media play in assisting data collection and analysis in ethnography. While benefits can be sought from using WeChat for data collection when researching Chinese tourists on the move; we should not neglect the investment in face-to-face and physical presence with those researched.

As a final note, the analysis of visual material as well as using social media as a tool in fieldwork have been argued as important parts of modern ethnographic studies; however, with the digital detox travel trend and Internet censorship, answers to many questions remain unclear. For instance, how to categorise research participants regarding their potential in collaborating with researchers online, what types of tourism research are suitable for using social media to collect data, and how to make ethnographic research inclusive need to be further scrutinised. Future research can also perform similar reflections on other social media applications to uncover the generalised role of social media in ethnographic studies among different cultural groups.

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