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Online Information and Communication Through WeChat and Chinese Students' Decisions for Studying in New Zealand

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The objective of this study is to explore Chinese students' preferences and decisions about studying in New Zealand. The empirical data are collected through a questionnaire, conducted among the Chinese WeChat users studying in tertiary institutions of New Zealand. While the research findings affirm that Chinese students do gain international studying information from WeChat, they may not use it as their primary channel. However, they agree that they like to obtain information about studying, politics, the economy, society, education, career development, and life in New Zealand through platforms on WeChat, and through their friends' or acquaintances' WeChat Moments. The information about the top three important factors are natural environment and general standards of safety (75%); government policies on immigration (74%); and relative stability of the society and economy (65.4%) whereas career development and life in New Zealand (56.7%); availability of scholarships (56.7%); and political and economic environment (52.9%) are of less importance to Chinese students' decisions of studying in New Zealand.

Keywords: WeChat, study decision, online information and communication, Chinese students, New Zealand

INTRODUCTION

Background

New Zealand's international education has made a significant contribution to the national economy. In the Annual Report of New Zealand Education (2017-2018), the educational authority summarised the central values which international education contributed to New Zealand, namely, supporting tourism, increasing trades, investment, and collaboration globally, enriching education, enhancing the workforce's skills and productivity, increasing cultural capital and diversity, and contributing to the national and local economy (New Zealand Education, 2018a, 2019). These values have benefited New Zealand's economy enormously. International education provided 47,000 job opportunities for New Zealanders nationally and contributed $5.1billion to the national GDP in 2018 (New Zealand Education, 2018b). According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2018), there were 10.9 million internationally mobile students worldwide. For those seeking universities to study English, the traditional host countries, namely, the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, are their first choice (Azmat et al., 2013). Educational institutions are seeking new

sources of revenue, owing to the reduction of public funding in education and COVID-19 hit international education industry enormously.

Reasons Possibly Motivating Chinese Students to Study Abroad

According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, the number of outbound Chinese students had reached 608,400 in 2017 (The Pie News, 2018), which was more than triple the 2008 number of 179,800 (Luo, 2017). Two factors influenced international students' overseas study decisions. On the one hand, the influence came from such internal factors as the desire to broaden global horizons, to enrich life experience and to gain knowledge from overseas studying and working experiences. On the other hand, they were affected by external factors such as wanting to relieve domestic pressures, the influence of friends, and the expectation to immigrate (Barclay et al., 2017). Personal attitudes, income and wealth of families, education level and academic achievement of parents, aspiration for further education, their image of nations and cities, their image of educational institutions, and their assessment of programmes impact on international students' decisions in choosing a studying destination (Cubillo et al., 2006; Hildén, 2011; Peng, 2014; Phang, 2013; Prazeres, 2013). One of the most critical revenue sources is the self/family-funded international students (IIE, 2014). An increasingly fierce competition occurs among host countries to attract foreign talents (Haupt et al., 2016).

The Way Social Media Influences International Students' Decision Making

Recruiting international students is a challenging task since the marketers need to overcome such barriers as language distinctions, and the different cultures and circumstances of the countries where students are interested to study. The effective use of local social media might eliminate the inherent language and cultural gaps as the local social media provide "highly efficient solutions with its capability to adapt to the expectations and requirements of potential international students rather easily" (Choudaha & Chang, 2012; Reddy, 2014, p. 160). Faced with even sharper competition in the abroad-study market, marketers have been exploring the most efficient and effective marketing approaches for delivering information to their prospective customers (Kotler, 2011; Rubin, 2015), as people are turning away from traditional media and towards on-demand, faster and more convenient channels of information diffusion (Rashtchy & Jaffray, 2007).

ICT tools such as Web 2.0 and social media has brought substantial challenges to traditional marketing approaches (Lubua et al., 2017). Compared with the traditional media, social media provide more interactive communications between educational institutions and international students, while likings and comments left on the social media networking sites by prospective students and their parents help the relevant content disseminate extensively in a short while and at low cost, or even for free (Ragini, 2016).

Current college students are born digital natives, skilled in digital communications (Thompson, 2007). They are the generation of social networking (Joly, 2007) so they engage in social networking activities (Schroeder & Greenbowe, 2009). The potential tertiary students' preferences for social media platforms are interactivities such as the instant messaging with recruitment staff, the blogs published by teaching staff, and the contents written by other students in the same context (Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008). They like to access online content through social media to reach information about enrolment at the potential institutions (Levitz, 2012; Morris, 2012; Reddy, 2014).

Universities worldwide use social media to contact and attract international students. For example, colleges and universities in the US adopted LinkedIn to provide additional information for decision-making through their academic profiles, and blogs for two-way communications (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). Some Europe-based universities used the online live chat forum to communicate with targeted international students (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). The New Zealand-based universities such as the University of Auckland (UoA), Auckland University of Technology (AUT), and Unitec offered many social media accesses for promotion and recruitment, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and WeChat. For instance, UoA offers around 300 plugins on its official website for potential students worldwide to get access to the webpages by their preferences (Ragini, 2016).

Figure 1. China's mobile apps ranking in Q2 2018 (China Internet Watch, 2018)

Use of WeChat in Chinese Communities

WeChat is a free instant messaging application, launched by Tencent Holdings Limited in 2011. And it has become the most popular social media platform in China (**Figure 1**) (China Internet Watch, 2018).

WeChat, the social media in Chinese communities, has been used in business for its excellence in building trust and relationships (*guan xi*) with customers (Niedermeier et al., 2016). There are at least two dimensions of the influence WeChat. Firstly, the extensive user population led to a tremendous social impact. Secondly, it offers diverse functions for business and individuals, such as interaction with family members and friends, posting opinions and sharing information, sales or purchases, payment or money collection, entertainment or learning, financing, and investment (Nzcntourism, 2018).

Characteristics of WeChat Marketing Communication

Li (2015) identified five characteristics of WeChat communication for marketing, namely, high exposure rate, high accuracy, high acceptance rate, high convenience, and high arrival rate. These characteristics functioned through these following marketing behaviours: precise marketing, relationship marketing, and WOM marketing. WeChat encourages sharing through eWOM (Yeweng & Yan, 2017). Due to WeChat automation, this is possible to have real-time engagement in new followers' first 48-hours (Ledormeur, 2019). WeChat allows real-time interactivities for efficient management of consumer relationship and service (Olivier, 2015) through customised content for targeted audiences (Liang et al., 2016). The core aim of WeChat marketing communication is to increase positive exposure and to lead to open channels by focusing on the precise markets (Long, 2013). It is the compelling success-led way that makes WeChat marketing achieve self-promotion (Wang, 2013). WeChat users find substantial articles on WeChat official accounts each month. They prefer to read useful, interesting, and emotionally touching content. They would like to read picture information in the WeChat Moment articles (Cheng, 2018). **Figure 2** shows the characteristics of effective WeChat content.

WeChat targeted communication and relationship marketing

WeChat marketers can take advantage of the diverse features and platforms to push customised content to targeted customers, using such features as "drift bottles", "QR codes", "find people around", "location-based precision" (Cai, 2014), "personal account" (*Wei Shang*), "WeChat Moments", and "official accounts". These characteristics also enable the implementation of WeChat relationship marketing, which focuses on the establishment of customer loyalty and long-term business-customer relationships, besides of new consumer acquisition and direct sales. Thus, brands can build robust emotional ties with customers (Denham-Smith & Harvidsson, 2017). In turn, the emotional ties generate a win for brands by ensuring a sustainable business, free promotions through WOM and valuable feedback (Rouse, 2014).
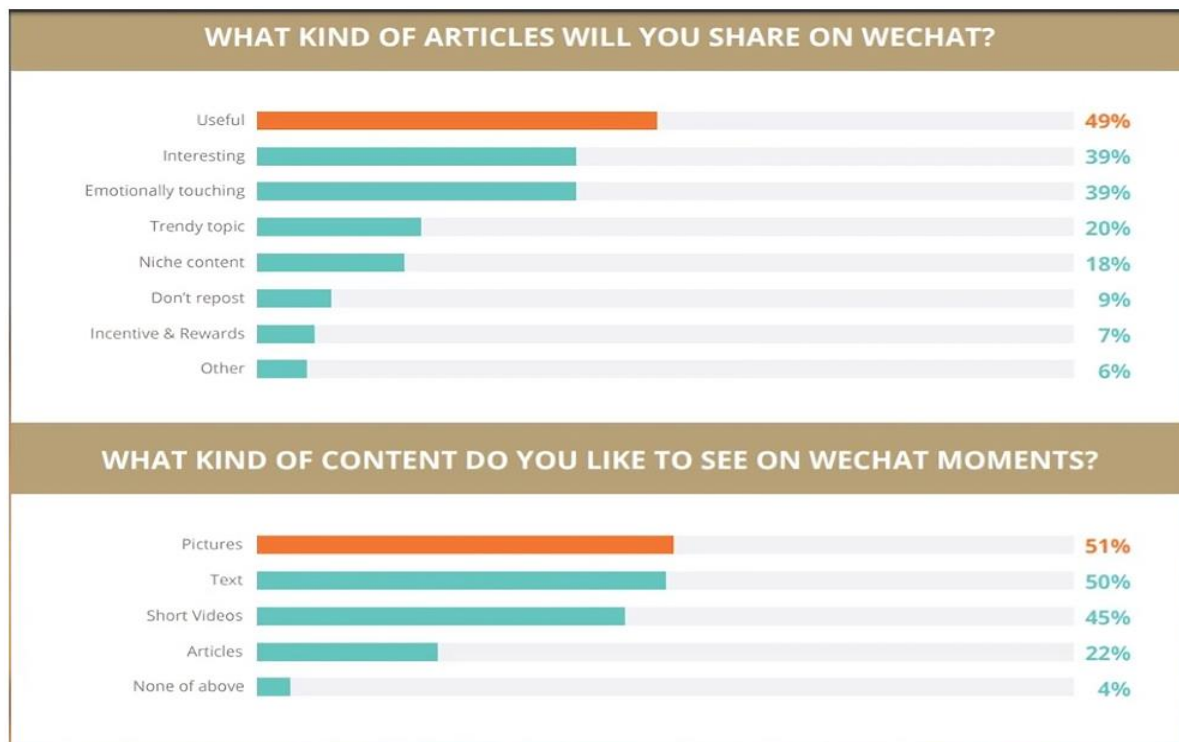
Figure 2. Characteristics of effective WeChat content (Cheng, 2018)

WeChat communication through official accounts for marketing

There are three types of WeChat official accounts, namely, subscription account, service account and business account. Individuals or organisations use subscription accounts to publish daily information. Organisations apply WeChat service accounts to create their websites and push promotion information amongst their followers, while business accounts allow organisations to push information to their followers as they want.

WeChat official accounts are the brand pages of enterprises, which are established for sharing content such as videos, photos, news, texts, activities, entertainment, advertisements, user-generated content and customers' comments on brands, products, or services. When one member shares something on their official account, other members may interact actively with the publisher regarding the details of the content, such as information about discounts, rewards of gifts, and new products' evaluation. In turn, customers' willingness to engage enhances the attractiveness of WeChat official accounts (Guo et al., 2017). Furthermore, such participation creates new customer-generated content about the relevant products on WeChat official accounts (Hongtao, 2009).

WeChat communication through WeChat Moments for marketing

The WeChat Moment (circles of friends) is an embedded social networking service (SNS), providing the integrated functions of Facebook and Instagram (Zhu & Zheshi, 2018). Dissemination of information through a semi-closed platform is the nature of WeChat. It is due to the properties of WeChat Moments that the "circles" of "friends" are pre-existing, close-knit, trustable networks, which are made up of people at different degrees of intimacy, e.g., family members, friends, peers, acquaintances, and other social relationships (Lin & Huang, 2018).

The essential two-way communication in WeChat Moments is implemented through posts published by firms, and comments and likings added by audiences. In this way, members of WeChat Moments consolidate their mutual relationship and intimacy (Gao, 2016; Zhu & Zheshi, 2018). Interactive communications on WeChat moments differ from those on other SNSs due to the pressures on social relationships and interactions characterised by some unique socio-cultural traditions, such as "high collectivism, high power distance" and "*guan xi*" (relationship) culture in Chinese communities (Luo et al., 2015).

Influence of electronics words of mouth (eWOM) on WeChat marketing

Many studies have identified the impact of eWOM on information adoption and purchase intention on social networks and shopping websites (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Filieri, 2015; Park & Lee, 2009; Yang et al., 2015), e.g. facilitating communication, promoting confidence, increasing purchase intention, recommending product or service (Che & Cao, 2014), strengthening business ties and relationships (Purnasari & Yuliando, 2015; Rozzell et al., 2014), improving expertise (Lee & Koo, 2012), and boosting subjective norm and trust (Che & Cao, 2014).

Social media have changed the approach to the market with eWOM communications, shifting it from one-to-one and one-to-many communications, to one-to-many and many-to-many communications (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Compared with the traditional WOM, which is highly credible and convincing due to the nature of face-to-face communications, eWOM must ensure the receivers have confidence in the information cues. In all forms of eWOMs, the many-to-one eWOM is the most persuasive style for driving customers to make decisions, since the "aggregate evaluative information" provides them with "the explicit and obvious collective trend" (Weisfeld-Spolter et al., 2014, p. 262).

With the strengthening of the intimacy between WeChat users, information publishers' beliefs and attitudes elicit in viewers a willingness to share the information with other WeChat users in eWOMs. Furthermore, opinion passing (citations of others' reviews and comments) has more influence than opinion giving (expression of personal opinions) (Song et al., 2017). Additionally, users who are quickly affected by subjective norms (perceived essential people, i.e., family members, friends, teachers, or peers (Petty & Cacioppo, 2012) are more likely to share their opinions in WeChat groups or WeChat Moments.

Research Questions

In this study, the research aim was achieved through the implementation of the five research questions, which went through a detailed process of exploring the factors influencing Chinese students' decisions about studying in New Zealand, and WeChat content marketing strategies, as follows:

1. Would Chinese students like to get information from WeChat about deciding to study in New Zealand?
2. Would Chinese students like to read WeChat articles about education and academics such as New Zealand's educational environment, institution information, university rankings?
3. Would Chinese students like to read articles from WeChat about the political, economic, and social environment in New Zealand?
4. Would Chinese students like to read articles from WeChat about how to develop their career and life in New Zealand?
5. Would Chinese students like to obtain information about studying in New Zealand through the channel of eWOMs such as their friends' WeChat Moments?

Research Gaps

The educational institutions and the abroad-student recruitment agents in New Zealand have perceived the significance of the Chinese market and WeChat marketing. A web article even used "WeChat Phenomenon Hits New Zealand" (Scoop, 2017) as the title to describe the popularity of WeChat in New Zealand. Recently, most of the eight state-funded universities and institutes of technology, and polytechnics have opened WeChat accounts for the recruitment of Chinese students.

According to the statement about the importance of WeChat in Chinese Communities, and that of Chinese students to New Zealand's educational economy, New Zealand's scholars and researchers should attach importance to the study of WeChat and WeChat marketing. However, there are very few academic articles exploring the characteristics of WeChat content which affect Chinese students' decisions about choosing New Zealand as the host country. There is a dearth of international students in New Zealand due to the long closure of the boarders during COVID-19. This makes pertinent to understand the factors which international students considered while making decision to study in New Zealand. This research gap turns out to be a research opportunity for the study to explore the influential factors of WeChat content on Chinese students' decision to study in New Zealand.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The push-pull factor theory may explain which factors push the Chinese students out of China and which pull them into the destination countries. This theory states that international students are likely influenced by factors such as politics, economics, education and academics, the environment, career-related influencers, and the recommendations of close people. These factors can be classified into three broad categories, namely, educational, political/socio-cultural, and economic factors (de Wit et al., 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007). Previous researchers such as Bodycott (2009), Counsell (2011), Eder et al. (2010), Kavakas (2013), Maringe and Carter (2007), and Petruzzellis and Romanazzi (2010) have identified the push-pull factors, which motivate international students to study overseas.

A survey was conducted to collect data through questionnaire. The cross-sectional data were analysed through descriptive analysis. SPSS was used to obtain the analysis results and the output of the relevant pie charts. In addition, the technique of convenience sampling was used in both the pilot study and the actual data collection. The participants were selected non-randomly from the overall Chinese students studying in the tertiary institutions of New Zealand.

The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part A is designed to collect WeChat users' demographics data, covering their nationality, gender, and age. With this data, the study tries to understand the age and gender of Chinese students studying in New Zealand. Part B of the questionnaire aims to investigate Chinese students' preferences for the primary push-pull factors in WeChat content.

For testing the validity of the research instrument, rationality of the procedure, and effect sizes (Fawcett & Tulman, 2018), the study conducted a small pilot study among thirty Chinese students studying in ICL Graduate Business School. Based on the feedback of participants in the pilot study, few small issues were detected and revised.

To ensure the commonly acceptable minimum sample size for a meaningful research result (Saunders et al., 2016). In total 104 responses to the questionnaire survey were received, hence the sample size for this study is 104. The survey was conducted with the Chinese students studying in level 5 to level 9 in the academic institutions in New Zealand. The research plan and questionnaire for the current study were approved by the ICL Research Ethics Committee (ICLREC).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This descriptive analysis consists of two main parts – the analysis of the demographic information of the respondents, and the principal elements of the factors of WeChat content impacting on Chinese students' decisions about studying in New Zealand, which de Wit et al. (2008) and Maringe and Cater (2007) classified in three categories: political/socio-cultural, economic, and educational/academic factors.

WeChat User Identity and Respondents' Nationality

Since the study plans to implement the survey among Chinese adult WeChat users, the participants of the study should meet these two fundamental requirements; they should use WeChat and be Chinese. The data is collected from Chinese adults only as all the respondents who use WeChat.

Gender of Respondents

The pie chart in **Figure 3** shows the results of gender. **Figure 3** exhibits the gender of Chinese respondents. 65 respondents out of the total of 104 were female, accounting for 62.5% of the participants. This percentage is about 30% higher than the rate of male students (37.5%).

Ages of Respondents

It is crucial for WeChat marketers to know the ages of the main population who choose New Zealand as their study destination. The respondents' ages as shown in **Figure 4**.

Figure 4 shows that the age groups with the most respondents are under 20 years, 21-25 years, and 31-35 years, respectively. This statistical result indicates that the primary age of Chinese respondents who intend to study in New Zealand is between18-35 years. The largest age group is 21-25 years, with a percentage of
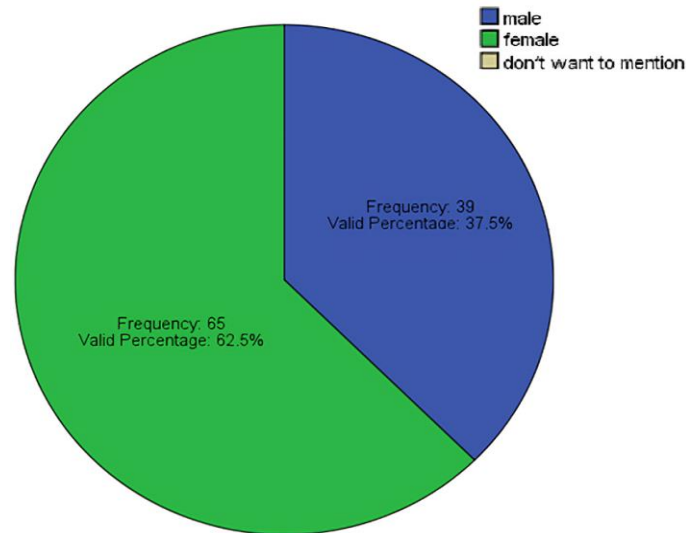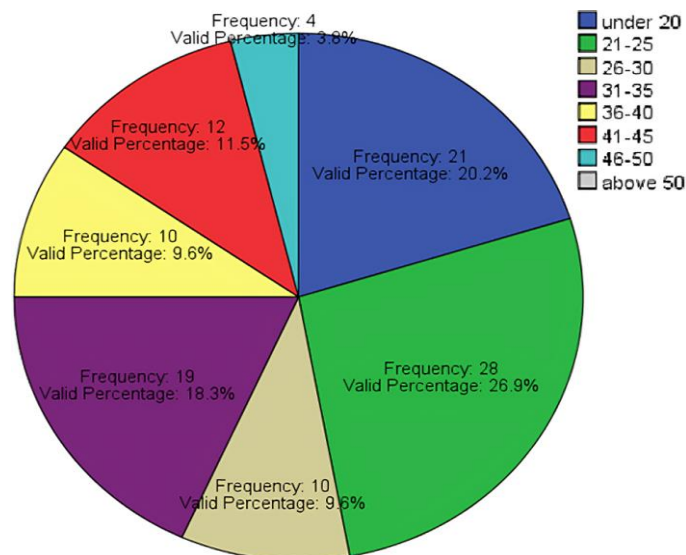
Figure 3. Respondents' gender

Figure 4. Respondents' ages

around 27%, and 20.2% of respondents are under 20 years. Over 18% of them are in the 31-35 year. There are relatively fewer respondents in the group of 25-30 year, only 9.6%. The age group of 36-40 year is not big either, with the same respondents and percentage as the 25-30-year age group. No respondents are falling in the age group of 50 year, and the respondents in the "45-50" age group were small, only 3.8%.

Seeking Information About Studying Destinations and School from WeChat Content

To investigate the respondents' preferences of using WeChat to get more information about New Zealand and their potential schools or universities, the researchers ask the respondents to choose their responses. The pie chart in **Figure 5** illustrates the statistic result.

As shown in **Figure 5**, 28.8% of the respondents *agree* and 5.8% of them *strongly agree* that they would like to get information about studying abroad from WeChat content, e.g., taking New Zealand as an abroad studying destination, and finding information about targeted schools. In comparison, 20.2% of the respondents choose *disagree* and 5.8% of them *strongly disagree* to obtaining information about studying abroad through WeChat. The percentage (34.6%) of the respondents who choose *agree* and *strongly agree* is in line with Yin and Ke's (2016) survey result, which showed that 30.6% of international students sought overseas studying information through social media.
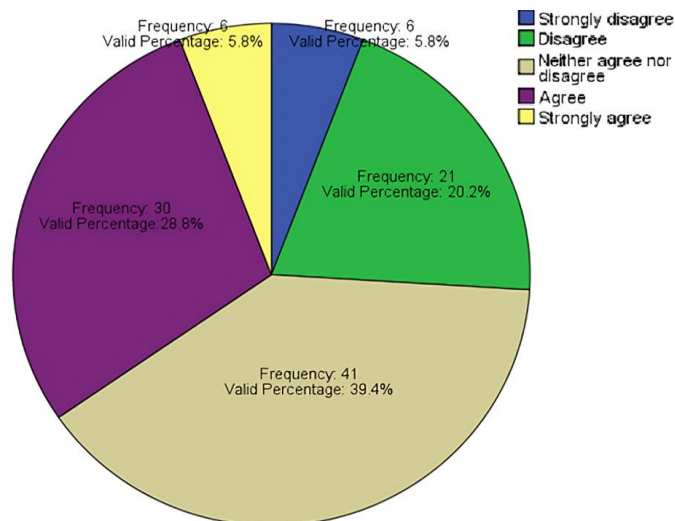
Figure 5. Seeking study destination and school information from WeChat
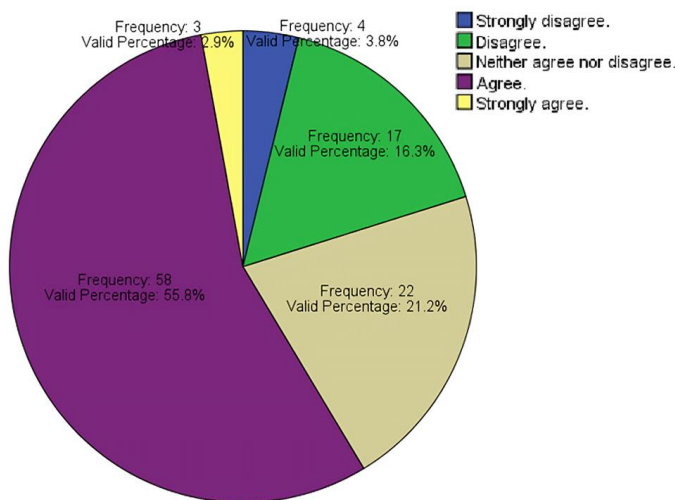

Figure 6. Reading articles about education environment and institutional ranking on WeChat

From **Figure 5**, 41% respondents *neither agree nor disagree* (39.4%) with the role WeChat played in their decisions about choosing New Zealand as the studying destination and finding school information. Hulme et al. (2014) indicated that recommendations of student recruitment agencies and parents' expectation were the two critical factors influencing international students to make their decisions about studying overseas. Zhang and Zhou (2018) had the same finding that parental opinions had a significant impact on Chinese students' decisions about studying overseas.

Information About Educational Environment and Institutional Rankings on WeChat

When Chinese students have decided to study in New Zealand, they investigate the overall educational environment of New Zealand, then the rankings of their potential schools or universities. **Figure 6** shows the preferences of the respondents for reading articles about New Zealand's educational environment and institutional rankings on WeChat.

According to **Figure 6**, 60% of respondents would like to read WeChat articles about education or academic-related content. Over 55% of them agree that they prefer to get information about the educational environment and university rankings through WeChat, while other 2.9% *strongly agree*.

Other factors of WeChat Content related to education or academics also have relatively high rates of *agree* and *strongly agree*. The study assumes that Chinese students are likely to be concerned about education-related factors when deciding to study in New Zealand, but not as much as about the natural environment, social stability, and immigration policies.
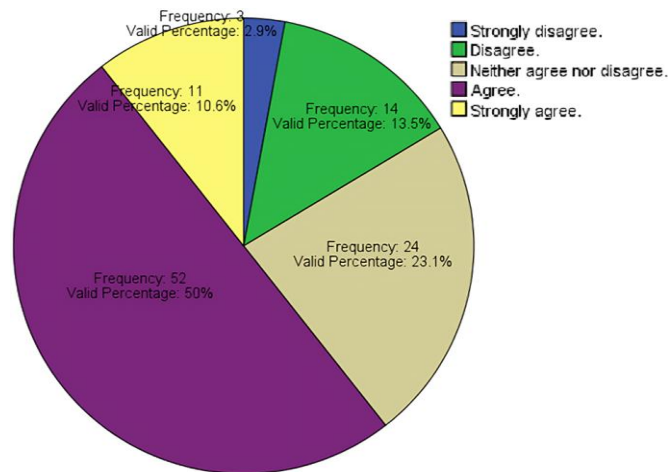
Figure 7. Information about academic reputation, educational resources, & teaching quality from WeChat
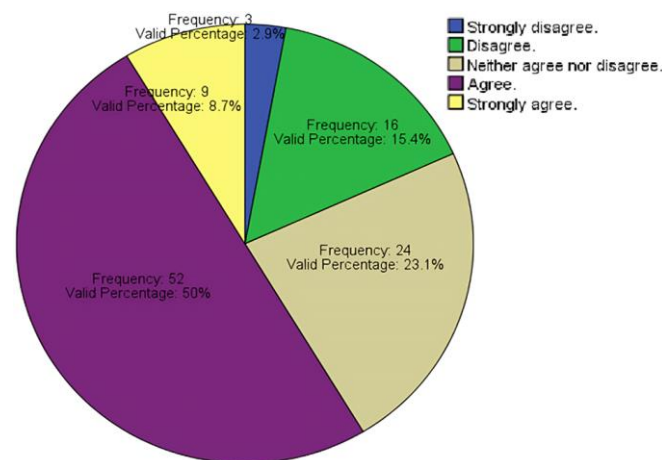

Figure 8. Getting information about programme appeal, relevance, and design from WeChat

Zhang and Zhou's (2018) findings may explain this phenomenon, in which, the macro-level of push-pull factors, such as the political, economic, and social environment, and immigration policies, played the most significant role when Chinese students chose their study destinations. After their determination of their host countries, they shifted their attention to more refined factors, e.g., institutional reputation, education quality, tuition fees and scholarship, at the meso-level. However, 16.3% of the respondents *disagree* and 3.8% of them *strongly disagree* that they would like to read articles about the educational environment and university rankings through WeChat. Additionally, more than 20% of them *neither agree nor disagree*. It is probable that they prefer other channels than WeChat content to obtain education-relevant information.

Information About Academic Reputation, Teaching Resources, and Quality from WeChat

When Chinese students have determined their schools or universities, they may shift their concerns to the reputations of the educational institutions, the educational resources and facilities institutions can offer, and the teaching competencies of staff. **Figure 7** shows the respondents' choices of the relevant WeChat content.

Figure 7 shows that over 60% of respondents *agree* (50%) or *strongly agree* (10.6%) that they would like to get information about academic reputation, educational resources, and teaching quality from WeChat when they decide to study in New Zealand. The education-relevant factors as costs, institutional image, and programme and course appeal, may impact on international students' decisions when choosing their destination countries (Coco, 2015; Phang, 2013).

Information About Programme Appeal, Relevance, and Design from WeChat

Figure 8 presents the preferences for getting information about programme appeal, relevance to their interest, and designs of programmes from WeChat.
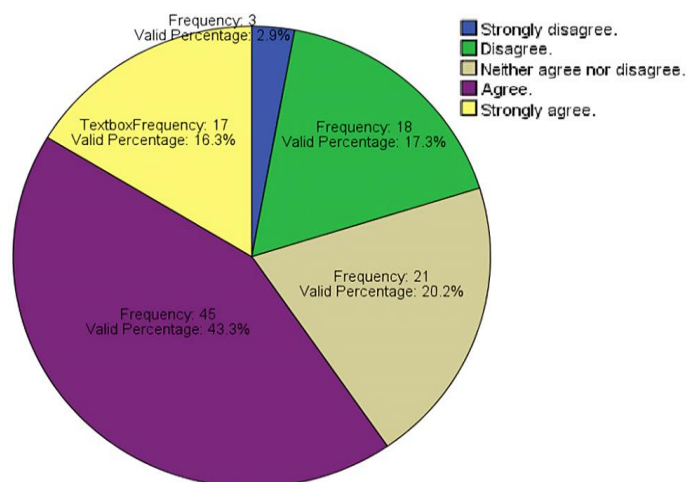
Figure 9. Getting Information about Tuition Fees of Educational Institutions from WeChat

It is clear to see from **Figure 8** that the respondents have the almost coequal preference for the WeChat content about programme appeal, relevance, and design as for the previous one. The overall percentage of respondents choosing *agree* and *strongly agree* is 58.7%. In his study, Phang (2013) indicated that the appeal of the programme might be one of the decisive factors for international students when choosing destination countries. Around 18% of the respondents choose *disagree* and *strongly disagree*. It is likely that they think this factor has less significance than the other education-related factors.

Information About Tuition Fees of Educational Institutions from WeChat

Coming from families with different financial conditions and backgrounds, Chinese students have differing levels of concern about tuition fees. The responses to preferences for getting tuition-fee-related information through WeChat exhibit a division in opinions, as shown in **Figure 9**.

Figure 9 shows that around 60% of the respondents *agree* (43.3%) or *strongly agree* (16.3%) that it is crucial for them to gain information about tuition fees of educational institutions from WeChat when they choose study destinations. As for the 20% of the respondents who choose *disagree* or *strongly disagree*, they may come from families in a sound financial condition, so they do not think WeChat content about studying costs would influence their decisions when choosing study-destination countries. Chinese students' parents treated studying abroad as a family investment to offer their children a competitive edge when they sought careers back in China (Bodycott, 2009; Counsell, 2011; Yang, 2012). The study assumes that those Chinese students, who choose *disagree* or *strongly disagree*, may place more importance on educational resources and teaching quality and other factors, instead of tuition fees.

Information About Availability of Scholarships from the Government or Educational Institutions from WeChat

Achieving a scholarship may be significant for some Chinese students from average households. When the researcher asks the respondents to respond to getting WeChat information about the probability of attaining scholarships from different sources, they gave feedback as shown in **Figure 10**.

Figure 10 shows that over half of the respondents "agree" (44.2%) or "strongly agree" (12.5%) that it is crucial for them to read scholarship-related WeChat content when they choose studying destinations. Some scholars had indicated the importance of scholarships when international students from different households chose universities. Wu and Myhill (2017) found from their research that the availability of scholarships ranked as the second most critical motivator among the seven reasons which made Chinese students decide to enrol at the University of Tasmania. Norazlyn et al. (2016) indicated a similar phenomenon in Malaysia.

For those choosing "disagree" (13.5%) and "strongly disagree" (3.8%), perhaps they are from affluent families, or their educational institutions do not offer scholarships, or they are not so confident of winning scholarships.
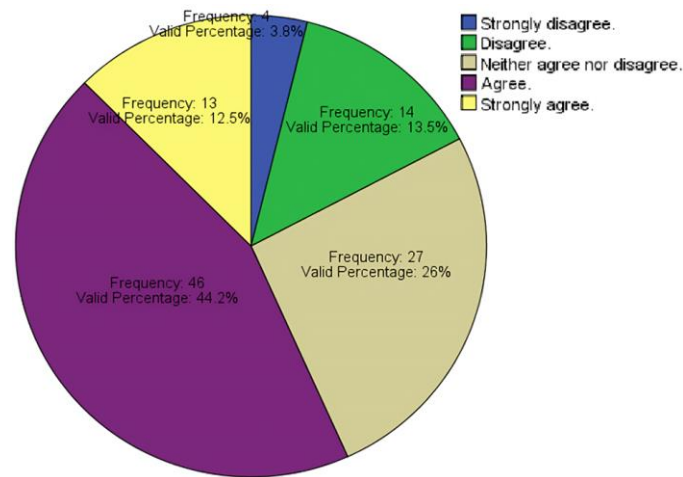
Figure 10. Getting information about availability of scholarships from the government or educational institutions from WeChat
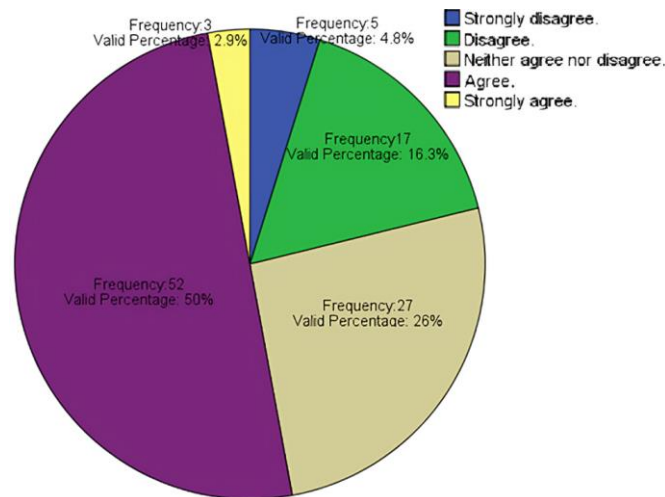

Figure 11. Reading articles about New Zealand's political and economic environment on WeChat

Information About New Zealand's Political and Economic Environment

The respondents rate their preferences for reading WeChat content about the political and economic environment in New Zealand, as presented in **Figure 11**.

From **Figure 11**, around 53% of respondents "agree" or "strongly agree" that they prefer to read information about the political and economic environment in New Zealand from WeChat when they are deciding whether to study in New Zealand. International students' first concern is about the living standard of their host countries. The perceived living environment may encompass the economic level, and the political and social environment of a host country (Novak et al., 2013). It is possible that the 26% of the respondents who choose "neither agree nor disagree" may not understand implication of political and economic environment since political and economic environment will affect every aspect of their lives in host country.

Information About Social Stability in New Zealand on WeChat

With the purpose of understanding Chinese students' concerns about the stability of society in New Zealand, the respondents were asked how much they would like to read articles about social stability in New Zealand from WeChat. **Figure 12** shows their options. **Figure 12** presents that 65.4% of the respondents would like to read WeChat content about the stability of the society and economy in New Zealand. Chung et al. (2009) also indicated that one of the valid reasons for Chinese people to choose New Zealand as their immigration destination could be that they identified the honesty and fairness of the society and its relatively low rate of corruption. However, there are around 30% who choose "neither agree nor disagree".
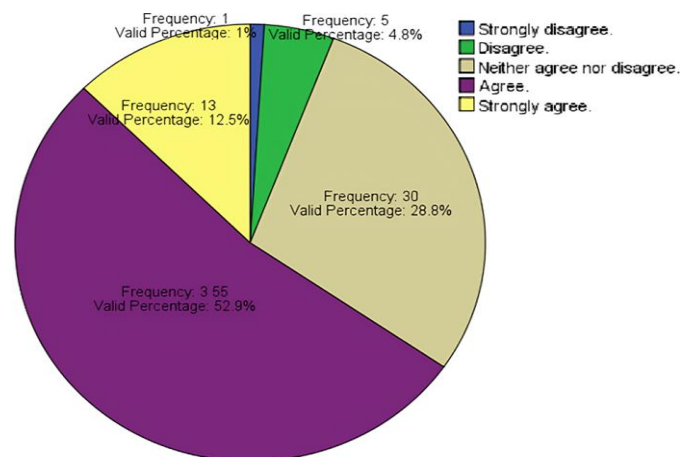
Figure 12. Reading articles about social stability in New Zealand on WeChat
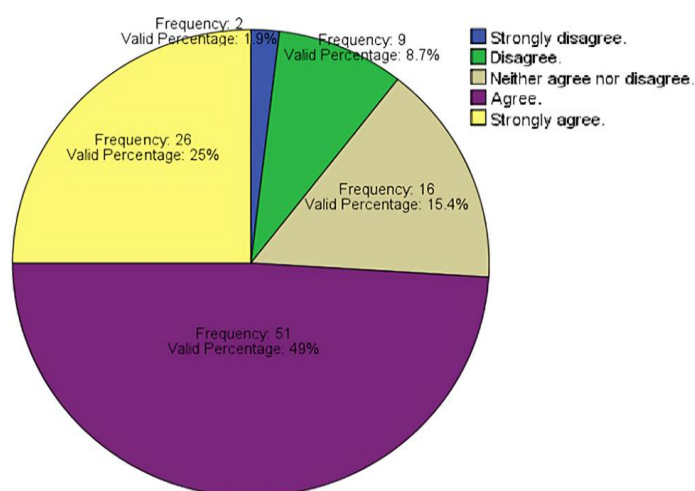

Figure 13. Getting information about New Zealand's immigration policies from WeChat

Information About New Zealand's Immigration Policies from WeChat

The immigration policies of host countries played a decisive role in international students' decisions to choose their studying destinations (**Figure 13**).

Figure 13 exhibits that 74% of the respondents "agree" (49%) or "strongly agree" (25%) that they would like to get information about immigration policies from WeChat. In all the factors of WeChat content, the preferences for WeChat content about the natural environment and general social stability, and immigration policies in New Zealand, rate as the top two. The respondents' preferences for reading WeChat articles about New Zealand's immigration policies are in line with the previous studies which indicated the significance of immigration policies when international students chose destination countries (Bodycott, 2009; Cheung et al., 2010; Counsell, 2011; Eder et al., 2010; Geng & Li, 2012; Lee & Morrish, 2012; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mok, 2016; Shaw, 2014).

Information About Career Development and Life in New Zealand on WeChat

The respondents were asked about getting information for career development and life in New Zealand. **Figure 14** illustrates the result. From **Figure 14**, around 57% of respondents "agree" (48.1%) or "strongly agree" (8.7%) to wanting to obtain information about career prospects and life in New Zealand through WeChat. As mentioned earlier, Chinese parents' attitudes towards the payment for their children's education as they treat the costs for their children's abroad study as a long-term investment (Bodycott, 2009; Chen, 2007; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Eder et al., 2010; Maringe, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007), or as the opportunity to increase their overseas studying and working experiences, thereby enhancing their competitiveness in the workplaces in China (Counsell, 2011).
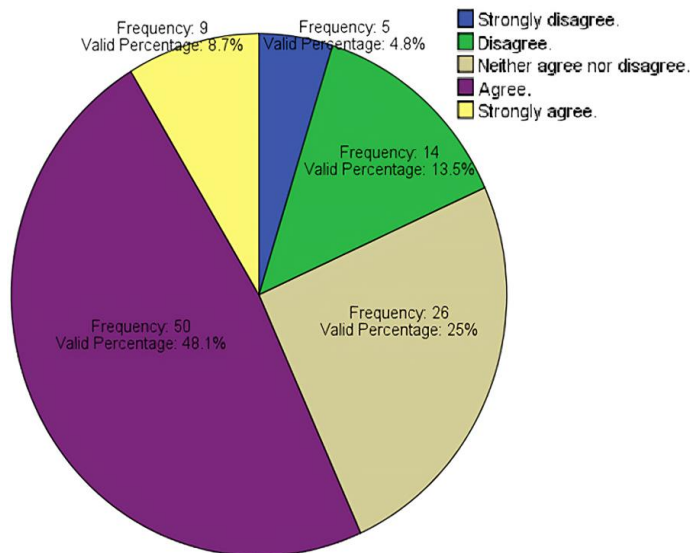
Figure 14. Reading articles about career development and life in New Zealand on WeChat
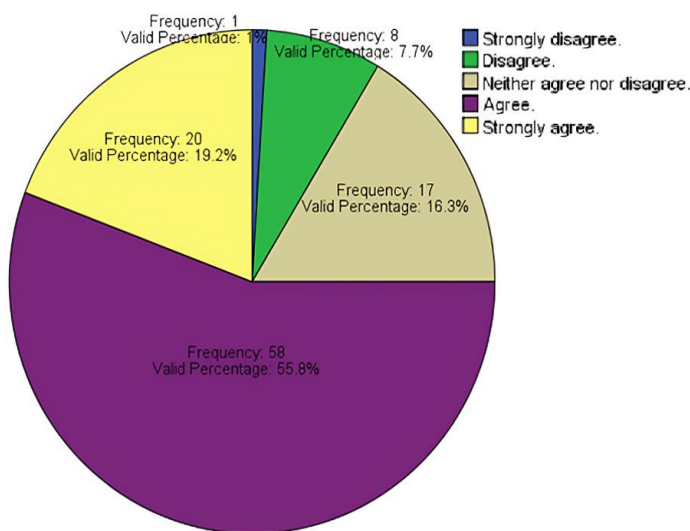

Figure 15. Getting information about the natural environment in New Zealand from WeChat

With reference to **Figure 15**, it seems that such a high agreement rate possibly reflects Chinese students' high expectations of obtaining employment and settling down in New Zealand.

Information About the Natural Environment in New Zealand from WeChat

New Zealand's global reputation is partially attributed to its well-protected natural environment. To understand Chinese students' perception of the importance of getting information about New Zealand's natural environment from WeChat, the respondents responded to the relevant question. **Figure 15** exhibits their attitudes.

Figure 15 shows that over 75% of respondents would like to read information about the natural environment and social safety of New Zealand from WeChat, with around 56% of them choosing "agree", and over 19% opting for "strongly agree". It seems that it is the number-one factor for attracting Chinese students to study in New Zealand.

Figure 16 shows that Chinese students' concerns for the natural and social context of New Zealand reveal that they choose New Zealand as a studying destination, not only for their current studying but also for their future career and life here.
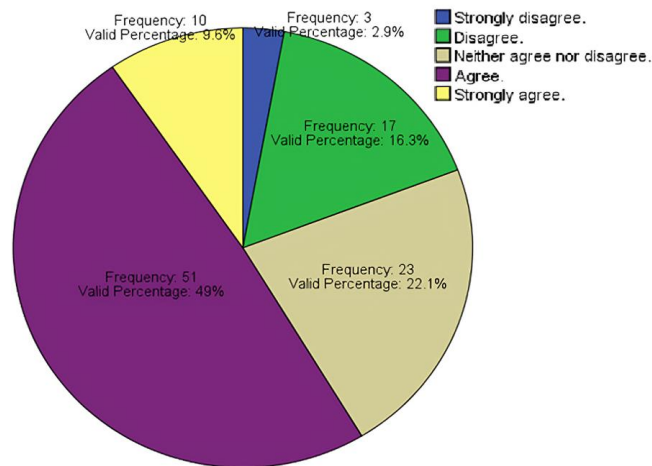
Figure 16. Preferences of reading abroad study articles shared in friends' WeChat Moments

Preferences for Reading Abroad Study Articles Shared in Friends' WeChat Moments

As a built-in social media platform in WeChat, WeChat Moments possess the nature of being persuasive due to the credibility of recommendations made by friends or acquaintances. To know the respondents' opinions of reading abroad-study information in their friends' WeChat Moments, the research collects the data as presented in **Figure 16**.

As shown in **Figure 16**, around 60% of Chinese students would like to read articles in their friends' WeChat Moments. 49% of them "agree" and 10% of them "strongly agree" that their friends' WeChat Moments are their preferred sources of getting information about studying in New Zealand. Two core concepts may provide support to the study's analysis. Firstly, information from trustworthy cues was more convincing for the argument/quality ensured by trusted publishers (Perloff, 2003; Petty & Cacioppo, 2012). Secondly, Weisfeld-Spolter et al. (2014) asserted that many-to-one eWOMs facilitated people to believe the perceived credibility of the information shared by the ones they trust.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude, the study answers the research questions by exploring Chinese students' preferences for reading WeChat content about studying in New Zealand and how WeChat convinces the prospective students to determine to study in New Zealand. The research aims to explore Chinese students' preferences for WeChat as a primary source for abroad-studying information, and for obtaining WeChat information about politics, the economy, society, education, career development and life in New Zealand, and their preference for the channel of eWOMs when deciding to enrol in an educational institution in New Zealand.

RQ-1: Would Chinese Students Like to Get Information from WeChat for Making Their Decisions to Study in New Zealand?

The findings show that Chinese students would like to obtain information about abroad studying from WeChat when deciding to study in New Zealand. However, WeChat may not play the role of the primary channel for them to gain overseas studying information. The study makes this assertion based on two seemingly contradictory phenomena. On the one hand, most respondents express that they prefer to use WeChat to get information about politics, the economy, society, education, career development, and life in New Zealand when deciding to study in New Zealand (see **Figure 6**-**Figure 16**). On the other hand, only around one-third of them would like to get more relevant information from WeChat (see **Figure 5**). Besides, many respondents cannot determine whether they would like to get more relevant information from WeChat or not. If thinking laterally, it may be a marketing opportunity which is worthy of being considered seriously.

Some previous studies may help support the study's arguments. According to the research findings of Yin and Ke (2016), Chinese students obtained information about studying abroad through four main channels: social media (30.6%), vertical portals (28.2%), lecture/educational exhibitions (26.4%), and study-abroad

agencies (25.15%). As well as these channels, web portals (17.9%) and printed brochures (16%) attracted the attention of some Chinese students. Scholars such as Hulme et al. (2014), James-MacEachern and Yun (2017) and Zhang and Zhou (2018) acquired similar findings. They indicated that parents' opinions acted as a source of information which tremendously influenced Chinese students' decisions on host countries, universities and even programmes. In comparison, scholars such as Junco and Cole-Avent (2008), Levitz (2012), Morris (2012) and Reddy (2014) identified the trend that international students preferred to access social media content for the information about their potential tertiary institutions. The data and research findings mentioned above imply the marketing potential of social media, which is WeChat for Chinese communities.

RQ-2: Would Chinese Students Like to Read WeChat Articles About Education and Academics Such as New Zealand's Educational Environment, Institution Information, and University Rankings?

Chinese students prefer to gain WeChat information about New Zealand's education and academics because most of the respondents prefer to education-related information through WeChat (see **Figure 6**-**Figure 10**). Many of them they would like to get more information about the educational environment, institutional information, and university rankings from WeChat. Most of them prefer to read WeChat articles about academic reputation, educational resources, and teaching quality. An excellent reputation of educational institutions has a positive effect on university choices of students (Cubillo et al., 2006; James-MacEachern & Yun,2017; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Szekeres, 2010).) The teaching quality also influences international students' university choice (Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010; Smith & Pitts, 2010). Furthermore, educational facilities are also one of the influential factors on international students' host country choice (Bodycott, 2009; Counsell, 2011; Eder et al., 2010; Lee & Morrish, 2012; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Phang, 2015).

The financial situations of international students' families had a direct impact on their destination choice (Paulsen & John, 2002; Kurlaender, 2006; Wilkins et al., 2013). The similar results from the current study obtained which shows that most respondents agreed to gain information from WeChat articles about tuition fees compared with other countries. Over half of them agreed to gain information from WeChat articles about the availability of scholarships from the government or educational institutions. Reducing tuition fees could motivate international students to make decisions (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Trilokekar & Kizilbash, 2013). Some Chinese families preferred to choose those educational institutions which provided scholarships or fellowships, to reduce family financial burdens (Boycott, 2009; Ng & Tang, 2008).

In addition, most respondents agreed to get information from WeChat about appeal, relevance and design of programmes offered by potential institutions. Many factors motivated international students to choose from the potential universities, one of which was well-designed programmes and courses (Cubillo et al., 2006; Phang, 2013). Levitz (2012) sequenced the respondents' preferences for social media content as: programmes, courses, and academic activities; scholarships and tuition fees, and enrolment; and education facilities and environment.

RQ-3: Would Chinese Students Like to Read Articles from WeChat About the Political, Economic, and Social Environment in New Zealand?

From the findings, the study conclude that most Chinese students read WeChat articles about New Zealand's political and economic environment. Furthermore, WeChat content about politics and economy-related factors impacts on the decision about studying in New Zealand since over half of the respondents agree that they read related WeChat articles. The international students from countries with a less satisfactory political and economic environment were always pushed out of their home countries and were pulled into the host countries with a favourable political and economic context (de Wit et al., 2008).

According to the results, most respondents agreed to get information about New Zealand's immigration policies from WeChat. Some previous researchers, such as Bodycott (2009), Cheung et al. (2011), Counsell (2011), Eder et al. (2010), Geng and Li (2012), Lee and Morrish (2012), Maringe and Carter (2007), and Mok (2016) and Shaw (2014), supported the study's results by identifying the significance of immigration policies on international students' decisions to choose from the potential studying destinations. In the study's findings, many respondents are preferring to read WeChat articles about social and economic stability in New Zealand.

Table 1. Sequencing of the factors of WeChat content by percentage

No.	Factors of WeChat content	Percentages of "agree" & "strongly agree"	Sequencing by percentage
1	Natural environment & general standards of safety	75%	1
2	Government policies on immigration	74%	2
3	Relative stability of the society & economy	65.4%	3
4	Academic reputation, educational resources, & teaching quality	60.6%	4
5	Tuition fees compared with other countries	59.6%	5
6	Educational environment, institution information, & university rankings	58.7%	6
7	Appeal, relevance, and design of programmes offered	58.7%	6
8	Career development and life in New Zealand	56.7%	7
9	Availability of scholarships	56.7%	7
10	Political & economic environment	52.9%	8

RQ-4: Would Chinese Students Like to Read Articles from WeChat About How to Develop Their Career and Life in New Zealand?

The research shows that most of the respondents prefer to get more information from WeChat articles about future career development and life in New Zealand. They read WeChat articles about career development and life in New Zealand. Career prospects played a critical role in international students' abroad-studying decisions (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Eder et al., 2010; Maringe, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007). International students treated overseas education as a career investment or as value for money (Maringe, 2006; Petruzzellis & Romanazzi, 2010). The conventional thinking about studying abroad of Chinese parents and students, that they will be more competitive in future work if they achieve degrees overseas (Ji, 2011). Chinese students acknowledge that increasing career competitiveness acts as one of the push factors motivating them to make decisions to study abroad (IIE, 2014). Regarding WeChat content about the natural environment and general society-safety standards, the respondents present a high degree of approval as most of them agreed about their preference for WeChat content about the natural environment and overall standard of social security.

RQ-5: Would Chinese Students Like to Obtain Information About Studying in New Zealand Through the Channel of eWOMs Such as Their Friends' WeChat Moments?

The study asserts confidently that WeChat is the favourable channel of eWOMs to diffuse abroad-studying information to potential Chinese students. As a built-in SNS and pre-existed, close-knit trustable networks of circles of friends, the WeChat Moment may be a proper channel of eWOMS for Chinese students obtaining the information of studying in New Zealand (Lin & Huang, 2018; Zhu & Zheshi, 2018). WeChat Moment communications ensure the WeChat Moment a perfect channel of eWOMs (Gao, 2016). The result shows that around over half of the respondents want to obtain more information about studying in New Zealand from their friends' WeChat Moments, therefore it is safe to say that Chinese students prefer to use eWOMs to obtain abroad-studying information from their friends' WeChat Moments.

Factors of WeChat Content

From the respondents' responses of "agree" and "strongly agree", the research orders the factors of WeChat content preference of Chinese students by their percentages, as exhibited in **Table 1**.

Based on the percentages of respondents' agreements for the relevant WeChat content, it is necessary for the WeChat marketers to pay attention to the efficiency of the WeChat information which reaches the recipients. It seems that Chinese students are interested in New Zealand's natural environment; immigration policies; the general standard of social and economic stability; academic reputation, educational resources, and teaching quality; and tuition fees compared with other countries. The study finds that the factors with high agreement percentages are the factors which Chinese students are familiar with, and which are generally effective because they are extensively applied by various sources, such as the Internet, websites of New Zealand's government authorities, and digital brochures released by educational institutions. In addition, the study finds a possible logical connection between the various factors influencing Chinese students to study in
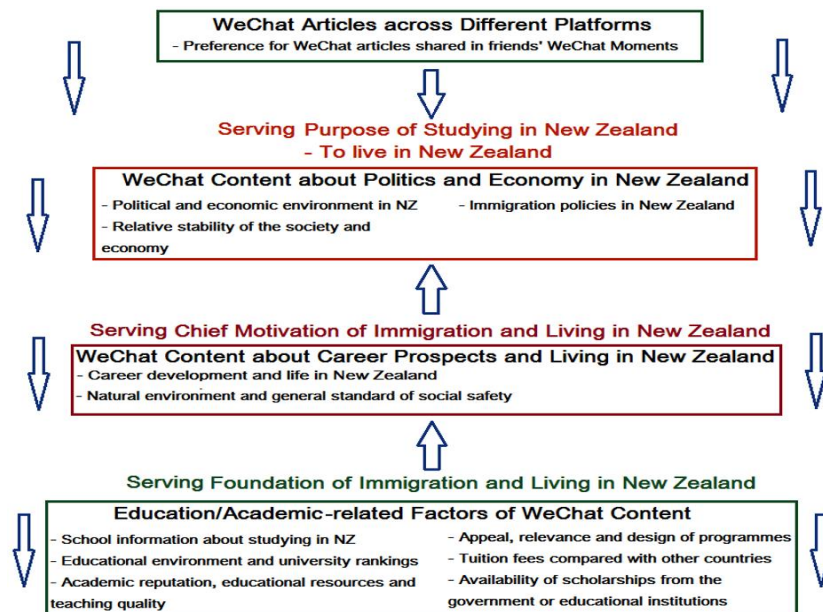
Figure 17. Relationship of the factors of WeChat content

New Zealand. With **Figure 17**, the study illustrates the factors of WeChat content influencing the Chinese students' decision of choosing New Zealand as a study destination.

At the core of all the factors is New Zealand's immigration policy, which is the factor determining the settling down in New Zealand. The other main factor is career development and life in New Zealand since a job consistent with New Zealand's immigration policy paves the path to becoming a permanent resident. When they look at their future life in New Zealand, those factors such as political and economic stability, and social safety, are more crucial to being taken into consideration. As for the education-related factors, they are the foundation of all the factors and play the role of leading to a future career, immigration, and living in New Zealand. When Chinese students search for information about studying in New Zealand from WeChat, they first place their focus on the natural environment in New Zealand since they start to plan their future life here. They then realise the importance of immigration policies for living in New Zealand. They search on WeChat for information about the jobs which may secure the approval of the immigration authority. They search through WeChat for the relevant education and academic articles about New Zealand's educational environment, teaching quality, educational resources, and programmes, in potential educational institutions. Educational institutions need to publish customised WeChat articles targeted to Chinese students with specific needs. It may facilitate Chinese-student recruitment agents to push personalised WeChat information at different phases of their decision-making about studying in New Zealand.

Limitations of This Study

The small sample size may not accurately represent the wider population. Due to the limitations of the sample-gathering range, the study collected 104 samples from among the Chinese students. It is preferable to gather the minimum number of samples from a broad gathering range. The research findings may not represent the wider New Zealand. They may represent only the private tertiary educational institutions. Also, most academic articles referred to are on tertiary education. Additionally, most of the respondents are studying tertiary programmes, from level seven to level nine.

Recommendations

Customisation of WeChat content for targeted student

WeChat marketers can send customised WeChat to the targeted potential students through different platforms, such as WeChat official accounts, WeChat Moments, location signature lines, drifting bottles, and brand zones. They can also take advantage of customer-generated content, marketing automation, QR scanning information and purchase reminding messages to reach the goal of information diffusion.

For the minority of active Chinese students who have clear career prospects, they may prefer to see the WeChat content providing a holistic career plan supported by rigorous official data. As for those who would like to learn about the programmes they are genuinely interested in, the specifically designed philosophy of different courses, their prospects after finishing, and the availability of further research fields may be important in the WeChat content leading to their final decisions.

Integration of subjective norm or significant others with many-to-one eWOMs

It may be effective and efficient for WeChat marketers to post recommending articles on WeChat by adopting the method of many-to-one eWOMs. WeChat marketers can get a firm-user co-created WeChat article by soliciting users' in-depth comments on one planned WeChat content, with proper opinion guidance, by providing rich official educational data and the recommendations of industry professionals.

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