

***A Comparison of the Use of Social Media in China and UK Higher Education in Art and Design Subjects***

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**Abstract**

**Purpose**–The purpose of this paper is to compare the use of WeChat in China vs. Facebook/ Youtube/ Blog/ Instagram in the UK in higher education practice, based on a case study in art and design subjects between a Chinese and a British university(Ningbo University and University of Huddersfield).

**Methodology** –A combination of literature reviews, action research, peer observation and semi-structured interviews. The research consists of two parts: one was conducted in the project *An Action Research of Blended Learning Mode Based on WeChat* in China, funded by the Department of Education of Zhejiang Province, and the other part results from the Visiting Scholar Programme in the UK funded by K.C. Wong Education Foundation, Hong Kong.

**Findings** – The findings represent similarities and differences between the Ningbo University and the University of Huddersfield relating to the use of social media and the strategy applying instructional technology in art and design subjects. It mainly indicates the potentially useful, pros and cons of social media in higher education practice, and presents strategies and innovation practices of adopting social media in creative arts and design subjects, including instant dissemination of ideas and processes, dynamic atmosphere of classrooms and studios, assessment and feedback, and students' portfolios.

**Originality/value** – The paper provides a cross-cultural perspective on sharing the knowledge and good practice of developing or enhancing the use of co-created social resources, strategies and technologies to meet the needs of the future all over the world.

**Keywords:** comparative research, social media, Higher Education, China, UK, creative arts education

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## 1. Introduction and Research Background

Social media are one of the latest examples of communications technologies that have been currently adopted by young people. Global social media research summary (Dave Chaffey, 2017) reports that the core 'top 5' social networks including Facebook and WeChat have not changed much from year-to-year. Other social media such as QQ, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Blog, are also widely used.

Social media has the potential to become a valuable resource to support education. Social media in education means the practice of using social media platforms as a path of making learning ubiquitous and more attractive. The rise in popularity of social media raises the question of should and how these platforms could be incorporated into the teaching and learning environments in universities. The motivation of this research is to compare the practice of using social media in creative arts education in China and UK's higher education sector.

Ningbo University in China and the University of Huddersfield in the UK were involved in the comparative research due to the similarity of their creative art and design curriculum. Researchers work and study in the two universities in the UK and China. The supported project of this study consists of two parts: one conducted in the project An Action Research of Blended Learning Mode Based on WeChat in China, funded by the Department of Education of Zhejiang Province, and the other part results from the Visiting Scholar Programme in the UK funded by K.C. Wong Education Foundation, Hong Kong.

The two universities are public universities and have a high starting point and rapid development, and respectively, are equipped with arts and design academic schools. Ningbo University (NBU), a provincially governed critical University in Zhejiang Province. It established in 1986, with the first donation from Sir Yue-Kong Pao. Pan Tianshou Arts and Design Academy (PADA), one of the academic colleges of Ningbo University. There are six real subjects in PADA, namely Visual Communication, Fashion Design, Environmental Design, Product Design, Industrial Design and Fine Art.

The University of Huddersfield (HUD) is a public university located in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, England. The present University of Huddersfield can trace its history back through several predecessor institutions and became the University in 1992. The School of Art Design and Architecture is one of seven academic schools in the university. Its subject including Graphics Design and Illustration, Visual Communication, Contemporary and Fine Art, Photography, Fashion Design and Business, Product Design and Textiles, Architecture and Architectural Technology.

## 2. Research Methodology and The Project

The research methodology combined with the literature reviews, action research, peer observation and semi-structured interviews. The study reported here was designed to explore a comparative overview of higher education in China and the UK with a focus on the use of social media for blended learning. Specifically, this paper examines WeChat in China vs. Facebook/ Youtube/ Blog/ Instagram in the UK and compare the use of these social media channels in the two countries' higher education practice,

based on a case study in art and design subjects between a Chinese and a British University (NBU and HUD). The study proposed the following questions:

- What are the potential uses, pros and cons of social media such as WeChat in China higher education and Facebook/ Youtube/ Blog/ Instagram in the UK higher education?
- How do teachers and students use social media in art and design education at NBU and HUD?
- What are similarities and differences between the NBU and HUD relating to the use of social media and the strategy applying instructional technology in art and design subjects?

### **3. Potential Usefulness, Pros and Cons of Social Media in Higher Education**

#### **3.1 Facebook, Youtube, Blog and Instagram in the UK higher education**

Facebook is a social network in the USA and has been existing from 2004. Until November 2013 about 350 million photos are uploaded every day. Until now, Facebook has 900 million users by estimation. Facebook is the most popular social media product in the world undoubtedly and the “share”function plays a critical role in the processing. It enable the users can communicate with friends within Facebook network very quickly and effectively for acquainting and grasping what friends’ status are up to while sharing of photos, journals, videos and so on. Facebook will announce when friends appreciate with ‘Like’ and make a statement of opinion on your sources. Staff writers (2009) states Facebook is not only a normal way to seek old friends at the same time it enable the users to know about what is happening now and recently, but also, it is an effective and free learning tool. Teachers and lecturers can utilise this social media for class projects, for boosting communication and so on.

Except Facebook, there are some other valid social medias for communication and sharing. For example, Youtube, Blog and Instagram. First of all, reference to Blog, in modern society it has become an easy approach to communicate on education. It is increasingly being utilised for educational purposes as a rapid and simple to use knowledge exchange and sharing platform. Blog is different from websites, the normal teaching websites just provide some links of referencing sources, and however the Blog provides more comments and wider range of background information. Blog is a fair and free platform, it does not need all the same opinions, and the most important characteristic is the Blog allows the users filtering information. It can make information be easily transformed into useful knowledge. The Blog is an important knowledge sharing platform which enables learners or target audience to enter into a great study environment and communicate equally.

Blog is a powerful, individual or customised personal knowledge management system. It can be integrated with work, hobby and study. In our daily life, accumulate with what to see and which is essence and reach the ideas collision during the processing. Perhaps, this is why the reason that in the UK, most of the students prefer to choose Blog to display the art works, then communicate and sharing to their target audiences. Youtube is an effective visual teaching platform as this social media website can allow users to upload and share their videos to general public users. In the context of its application on art and design related teaching material, Youtube can play

enormous role in visually guiding students to enhance their learning experience and hence produce effective learning outcome. Some typical examples are “Teachers TV: KS3 Art & Design - The New Curriculum” ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjx0gCz2ZY4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjx0gCz2ZY4)) and TEDx educational programs.

Instagram is a mobile app that allows users sharing images instantly. It is very convenient to choose image filter styles. Instagram not only shares pictures but also as is a very interesting and enjoyable app. The Instagram is a diversified social software. Perhaps, this is the most invaluable that it is still surviving as a free online service.

UK art and design lecturers often utilise the Blog that contains thought-stimulating articles that are illustrated with creativity, contemporary student art and design work, such as the examples shown below. The site has a multitude of resources for students and is promised to keep their target audience engaged for hours. Blogs and websites focus on higher quality works of art in the Higher Education sector. Consequently, it has a lot of advantages to readers/target audience. In fact, it has started to arrange a list of items that the people can easily search and utilise. Perhaps, the users would prefer to read which one is they interested as well as create a stylish blog. “The blog contains thought-provoking articles that are illustrated with creative, contemporary student artwork, such as the examples shown below by Beth. The site is a rich resource for GCSE and A Level Photography students in particular (these are qualifications studied by high school students in the UK) and is guaranteed to keep you engaged for hours. Highly recommended.” (Gale, A. 2017)

Blog is the most important social medium in teaching and learning sector in the UK. It can effectively shape a public platform. Also, it is the most effective approach of interactive learning and teaching. Especially in the UK education, it is not just has a long history and but has a widely used. Teachers will pay more attention to the blog teaching which includes the educational and art related contents, the images, the format and so on. The teachers tend to share the latest knowledge, news and the most valuable knowledge resources with their students through the blog communication.

Lectures and Course Leaders often create a page for their course on Facebook and these course pages usually establish multiple image bars and discussion sections. As a result, lectures can use the functions provided to enrich the courses on the page.

Art and design students in the UK usually upload and share their video clips and portfolio on YouTube or Vimeo. Many art schools and colleges have their official channels on YouTube or Vimeo to present their facilities and student work as a marketing tool. Video contents on these platforms are interesting and creative, and more importantly, the platforms are mobile friendly and accessible from various devices. The quality of these video resources and their value to learning has been well-documented in many disciplines including creative art and design. On these platforms, students can learn not only from their tutor and fellow students but also other relevant content in their field. In fact, many graduates and alumni still follow the social network channels of the institution and course where they graduated from.

### 3.2 WeChat in higher education in China

WeChat is a mobile communication and private social networking app. It is known as Weixin (literally: "micro message") in China —was launched in January 2011 by China's largest listed Internet company, Tencent, and has grown into the strongest leading social network during the past years in China. By 2016 it was one of the largest standalone messaging apps by monthly active users, with over 889 million active users (China Tech Insights, 2017).

Messaging, Official Accounts and Moments is the more important features of WeChat. For Messaging and Instant Messaging, it enables users to send messages by texts, photographs or voice and making video calls to either a single person or a particular group of individuals.

There are three types of *WeChat Public Platform* (official account): service account, subscription account, and enterprise account. WeChat Public Platform enables users who register as an official account to dispatch information to subscribers and interact with them.

*Moments* supports users to post image and text, share music (associated with QQ Music or any web-based music service) and article, as well as comment and "like." It can be set open and privacy to friends by the user. There are others features in WeChat: WeChat Pay payment services, City Services, Heat Map, Enterprise WeChat, WeChat Mini Program, Friend see and WeChat Index. All of them makes WeChat more compelling because it's fast, reliable, multifunction, private, and always on.

To some extent, WeChat is a mobile app combining the features of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram all in one, mixed with Skype and a walkie-talkie (JunWu and QingqingWan, 2014). Given its popularity, it's possible effectivity becomes a growing research topic and is being developed and promoted in various fields, including education.

It is the fundamental situation that the hardware and network meet the conditions for everyone who use WeChat in universities in China. In other words, University teaching environment ensure that the student cohort are indeed already literate with WeChat platforms and have a pre-existing presence within the social media space. With the development of mobile terminal, WeChat as a social media gradually become a new mode of research content for e-Learning and mobile learning. WeChat, especially its WeChat public platform aid individuals or organizations to create free curriculum platform, intelligent management curriculum resources, editing, publishing, retrieval, etc.. WeChat provides a new way to obtain learning resources, as well as two-way interactive features based on knowledge content.

China Association of Higher Education opened its exclusive subscriptions (WeChat ID: zggdjyxhwx) in October 2014. It means that the WeChat be confirmed and applied in higher education in China.

More and more empirical research immerse in various subject areas and papers and study reports published increasingly. For example, Empirical Research on WeChat Public Platform Assisted Class Teaching (XiaoxiaDeng, 2014), A Research on

Visualization Application of WeChat in Education in China (Danyanli, JieyinCao, 2016), The Strategy of WeChat Public platform in Higher Art Education Teaching Design (ZhengSun, 2017).

#### **4. Strategies and Practices of Using Social Media in Arts and Design Subjects**

##### **4.1 Peer observation and semi-structured interviews in UK**

The Blog can stimulate students to use the information which they are reading, writing, drawing and analysing the information which they are being provided with. For British students, blog is a necessary learning tool and most importantly it is a free platform, perhaps, this tool maybe different style in China. A blog can allow the author to organise a systematic study plan and make sure that their target students to pay enough attention to some design topic on the Blog. Some students are stronger than others at some fields, through the Blog, the students can find the areas where they have difficulty with and then mastering by deep learning. It is clearly to see, the same teaching field has different teaching methods. Blogging is more liberal and flexible methods to teach and learn. It also provides the students more enjoyable learning environment as well as a very effective and cost-efficient learning tool and approach.

Lecturers: Blog has three important aspects in teaching method. First of all, it can manage the knowledge systematically, manage sources and files through the Blog. At the same time, lecturers can use the knowledge system to summarise and prepare for the next lesson. Secondly, the information exchange can be realised, on the base of the internet as a medium for the interaction flourishes. Finally, it is convenient to make a record with question and advisable in the Blog and it has a key instructive to students. All in all, lecturers can view the updates of students through the home page on time and acquire that whether their target students have grasped the knowledge as well as understand the existing problems. If the students have problems, the lecturers can guide and help them to solve it as soon as possible.

Students: Students can look at articles from lecturers and other students through the Blog and acquire whether the other students have grasped the knowledge. The students enjoy the free environment because it can share with different opinions and cultures. Blogging not only can consolidate the key knowledge and difficulties, but also grasp other relevant knowledge. Otherwise, the Blog can broaden their users' eyes and as well as create a platform for interactive communication.

##### **4.2 A case study of using WeChat in NBU**

*WeChat Public platform for media* is the most active and influential tool on the WeChat platform (OU Yifan, 2016). The case study is based on Wechat and WeChat Public Platform Subscription Account "ZhiFen Mico Learning" (ID: nbu-dzfwjx) .



**Figure 1.** The WeChat Account of the case study

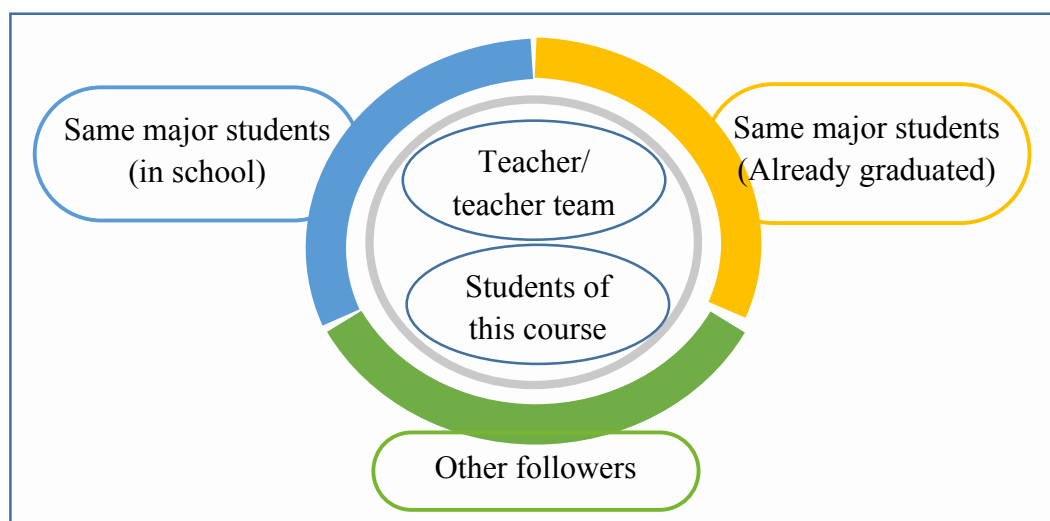
In this case, the teaching subject is fine art, and the type of WeChat Public Platform Account is individual subscription, mainly used to push the teaching information, curriculum resources, education share and learning assessment. What in the WeChat Public Platform? In generally, indicative references, lecture notes, teaching record, course assignments, presentation and the rethinking on teaching would convert to the reading material for WeChat public platform, in the form of text, photo and video. They could be selected and edited to cover the learning outcomes of the course.



**Figure 2.** The forms of reading material on WeChat public platform

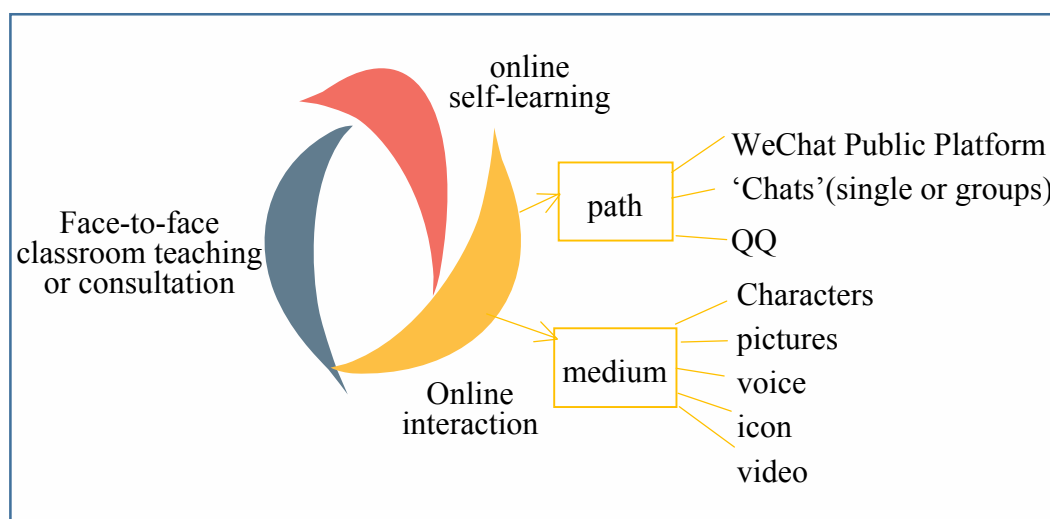
Who edits and manage the WeChat Public Platform? The teacher is not the only the editor because students take part in the activity of learning materials collection, preparation, and delivery, more correctly, the teacher is the director and manager.

Who are the participants? The users of WeChat Public Platform did not limit in teachers, students and human participant related to the course. What the teacher need to do is to batch group the users, divided them into the path group and the non-course group, the course group is labeled the real class, student's name, and ID. The whole class students were grouped according to the students voluntarily; usually, there were about four members of a course study group. Not only that, but team members can also extended to the same grade with the same primary. Therefore, teacher(teacher team) and students that from different grades and classes, even graduates would be an echelon, at the same time, form a learning community.



**Figure 3.** The Participants of WeChat Learning

There three forms about education interactive: Face-to-face classroom teaching and consultation , online self-learning and online interaction. During the using process of WeChat official accounts ZhiFen Mico Learning, students can leave a message in forms of character, picture or voice via the dialog box in real time, and the background editors or managers can receive real-time information and communicate with the users. Meanwhile, the users can exchange and communicate with other users via the community module on the WeChat. In spite of the WeChat Public Platform contain functions of interactive, such as answer menu, message, and comment, more handy interaction medium is *Chat* (single chat or group chat) in WeChat, one to one or one-to-many, at the same time the medium QQ frequently be used in combination. It is the most common interaction that the information is pushed with the combination of pictures and characters, mainly, make full use of image and video contents. With the application of visual materials, the users from art and design subjects may be more interested in understanding the contents.



**Figure 4.** The Form About Education Interactive

The WeChat public platform can present the process of teaching and learning , in a manner, the similar features of electronic portfolio broaden the evaluation of participants. The function of “comments” and “vote” can collect fans’ advice by users,

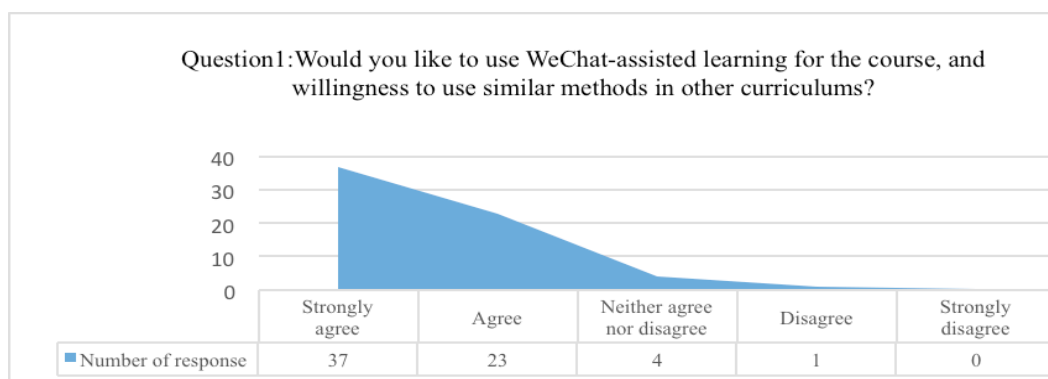


and it can set the valid time, participant range and assessment options. For example, the presentation (impromptu speech about art education from ManYang, <http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/856uvRfygJP575rPNW0hZw>), including her video, self-evaluation, classmates, and online voting. In addition to class classmates, there are 126 online Participants were given to vote.

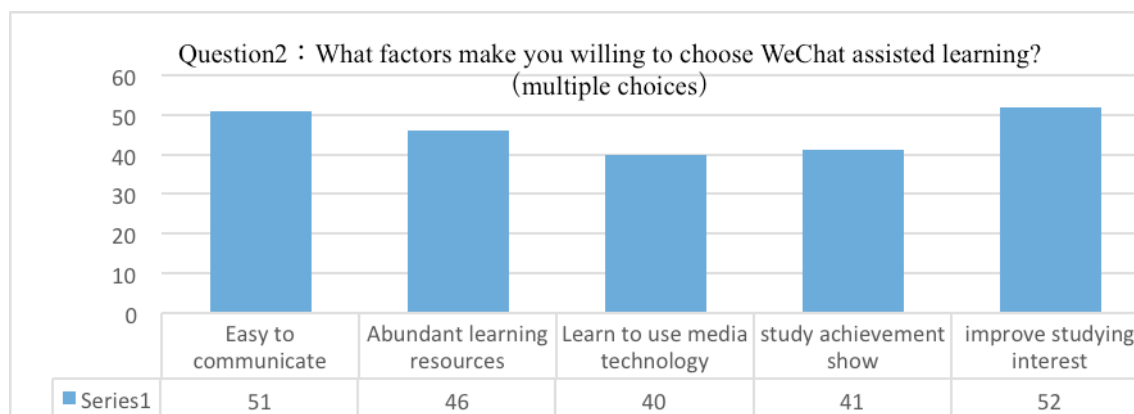
What are the unique advantages of using WeChat for arts and design learning? One side, it is very useful and conveniently for people to Visual communicate by WeChat. A lot of references can provide through various links to website, WeChat Official Accounts, or Apps. Search Specified Content can provide keywords search from Moment, Articles and Official Accounts on WeChat. The students and teachers can focus on subscribing to popular art and design account or others, which updates displayed in real time in the subscription bar. Some much attention subscription is very active. For instance, “SanShui Art” (WeChat ID:art-33, a private type official account) recommended outstanding artists at home and abroad; “China Art Academy” (WeChat ID:caa1928, a business type official account), is aimed at the academic family of art to push to the user palm.

On the other side, it is a good way to improve the visual and digital literacy of art and design students. As editors of the WeChat platform, their image editing and video production ability have improved in the study, and the operation of the social media also developed. When operation WeChat, editor or designer (students or teachers) often incorporation into other PageMaker, for example, XiuMi (xiumi.us), 135WeChat Editor (www.135editor.com), 96WeChat Editor (www.96weixin.com), Little Ant Editor (www.xmyeditor.com), and photo and video editor such as I JianJI and Corel.

The case has witnessed the incorporating social medium learning platforms with more traditional-style lecture/tutorial style transfer. Using WeChat-assisted learning, which meets the behavior of contemporary undergraduate habits, can be actively recognized and involved. Another way to view the effects of the case is the evidence collected over the two years on the evaluation questionnaires. The results are shown in questionnaire survey among participating in the study of 65 students, 92% of the students expressed they would like to use WeChat-assisted learning for the course, and willingness to use similar methods in other curriculums. There are some factors make you willing to choose WeChat assisted learning, such as Easy to communicate, Abundant learning resources, Learn to use media technology, study achievement show and Improve studying interest.



**Figure 5.** Survey results from evaluation questionnaires-1



**Figure 6.** Survey results from evaluation questionnaires-2

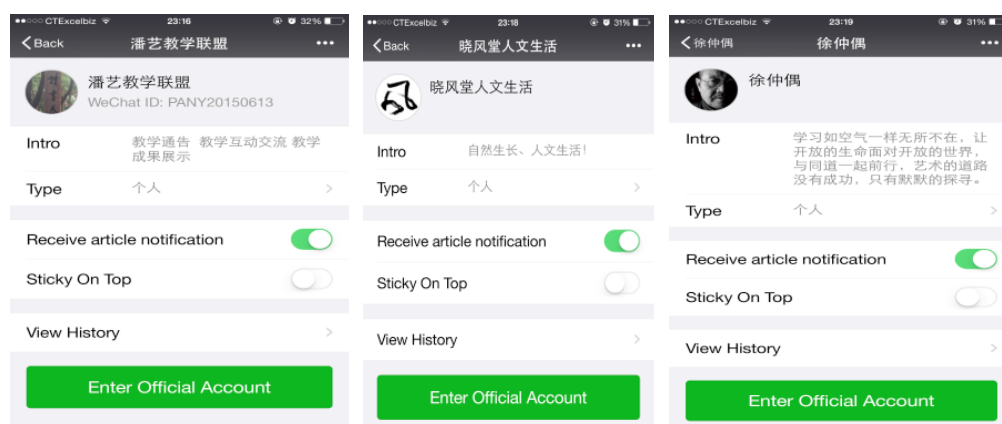
Answers to the open question “what is the harvest do you weigh from WeChat-assisted learning”, were summarized. The main findings are:

- Using WeChat, flexible bite-sized learning become possible. Learning not only takes place in the classroom but also in any space at any time. Meanwhile, using social medium platforms create rich learning environments to empower students to take ownership of their learning.

- Learners have more opportunities to express their opinions and share their work. It will soon be able to get a lot of comment and more valuable advice about my works through significant WeChat interaction, in addition, easy to get similar reference pictures or web link. According to the security need, it can be selected the way of interaction, private and public spaces, in other words, the way of one-to-one or chat in group.

The future career of art college students more likely connected with social media design. The process of editing is an excellent practice opportunity to explore design ways of media platform.

In addition to this case, there are other WeChat official accounts involved in teaching in PADA. For example, ‘PADA Education Alliance’ in charge of college teaching management part, ‘Xiaofengtang Humanities Life’ run by fashion and textile design department, and other WeChat platform such as “Xu Zhongou” managed by the individual.



**Figure 7.** Other WeChat account of the case study

## 5. Conclusion

There are some similarities and differences between the Ningbo University and the University of Huddersfield relating to employing social media in higher education practice. The similarities include the following several aspects: have the more valuable resource for supporting education; instant dissemination of ideas and processes; the dynamic atmosphere of classrooms and studios; assessment and feedback; students' portfolios. Certainly, there are some differences. Firstly, leading social media include Blog/YouTube (Vimeo)/ Facebook/ Instagram in HUD and WeChat in NBU. Secondly, except blog, students independently choose media assisted learning according to different functions and multiple paths in HUD. The students relatively lack active choice of media supported learning, but teachers organize consciously in NBU. Thirdly, design personalized interface in a blog which itself is an artwork, on the contrary, independent design in WeChat is that within a narrow range of choice. Lastly, the network course resources are also different between HUD and NBU. Students take to learn video courses more initiative and more entertaining in HUD than in NBU.

With regard to future research in this field, researchers should prospect further address the specific benefits and challenges of using social media as a teaching and learning platform. Furthermore, search for the solution of potential barriers about social media as a teaching and learning platform such as copyright, privacy issues and network literacy of both students and faculty. The cross-cultural perspective on sharing the use of co-created social resources could also be explored to promote the understanding of this emerging pedagogy to meet the needs of the future all over the world.

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