

# Evaluating Third-Person Effects Among Foreigners on China's Social Media: Wechat and Tantan as Case Study

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The social media have become part of the daily lives of foreigners living in China as they try to cope with social cultural dynamics of their environment. They rely on social media to keep in touch with loved ones, make new friends, and keep in touch with news and information around the world. To many of them, the social media are a necessary tool in managing boredom. However, the use of the social media comes with the challenge of third-person effect (TPE), a hypothesis which holds that individuals believe media have more effects on others than they have on themselves. Using two of the leading social media apps in China, Wechat and Tantan, by using a survey approach, we investigated the manifestation of TPE among foreigners in China who are members of the selected social media communities. Our results confirm TPE among our study group. It also shows that those under the influence of TPE have the potential for social media addiction. We advise that social media users are conscious of TPE in view of its negative effects on their well-being.

*Keywords:* Wechat networking, media influence, online exposure

## Introduction

Social media are a major feature of daily our communication. The use of social media as a means of interaction has received a boost by the entrance into the Internet frame, the Wi-Fi, which ensures Internet connectivity in virtually every space. Today, people use social media not only in their offices but also in such public places, such as parks and gardens, restaurants, and in the bus trains. Social media networks are increasingly permeating society (Dickey & Lewis, 2010). In the contemporary society, this computer-mediated form of communication serves various purposes, ranging from chatting, sharing of information, marketing, advertising, entertainment, political mobilization to academic engagements including distribution of lecture materials lectures and exchange academic information by students.

Different scholars hold different views about the history of the social media, with some of them tracing it to the emergence of email in the last century. However, in the year 2000, social media received a great boost with many social networking sites springing up (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011). According to Edosomwan et al. (2011), this development gave a boost to the transformation of interaction among individuals and organizations who share common interest in such areas as friendship, information, education, and music, with the likes of MySpace and LinkedIn being among the early social media setups. Douai, Auter, Wedlock, and Rudyk (2013) posited that social media have strengthened relationships and

allowed individuals to select and compare news and news sources, in addition to radically influencing the speed at which news can be disseminated, obtained, and controlled. It is estimated that worldwide hundreds of millions of subscribers are connected to different social media platforms, including China's Wechat and Tantan, upon which the study is based.

### **Social Media Revolution**

The 21st century is experiencing a communication explosion, sparked by social media. Social media which are part of the Internet mediated new media have changed the ways of life in several ways. The social media revolution has resulted in vast changes in communication even in the area of how consumers receive and use marketing communications (Williams, Crittenden, Keo, & McCarty, 2012). The different social media tools help people of different ages and backgrounds to interact with one another either as individuals as groups.

Social media have the potential to fundamentally change the character of our social lives, both on interpersonal level and community level. Social media are effective in the management of organizations, playing a key role in the transformation of the way organizations communicate and becoming available tools at the more cost-effective ways compared to traditional approaches, such as email (Baruah, 2012). Their cost-effectiveness makes social media platforms the preferred choice of many students in seeking access to news and other forms of information. Most social media platforms come with various options for news from around the world, create the necessary environment for social interaction and link ups, and provide psychological succor to some of their users. According to Raju, Valsaraj, and Noronha (2015), online social networking is the latest trend in virtual communication. It is inexpensive, free, and easy to use. The sites sometimes provide psychological succor to some young people as they leverage them to freely express their concerns.

Social media have also been deployed by young adolescents to express their political rights, with the role social media played in the Arab Spring still fresh in the mind. According to Keating and Melis (2017), young adults may be more likely than elders to use social media for political engagement, though this depends on their level of interest in any particular political activity. Social media have also revolutionized the manner in which teaching and learning are carried. Educational institutions now rely in those sites to connect to both the current and potential students and even to deliver instructional materials (Abdulahi, Samadi, & Gharlegghi, 2014).

### **Wechat**

Set up by Tencents Holdings Ltd. in 2011, Wechat is the most popular social media network in China. It has an estimated millions of subscribers. As the market leader in the growing social media market in China which also includes Weibo, Tantan, QQ, and Yukou, Wechat has entrenched itself by providing various platforms which are attractive to both the young and the old. It is easy to download and install and is also compatible with virtually every smart phone available in the market. Wechat provides a platform for voice and instant text messaging, real live location sharing, video and voice calls, sharing of moments, and top "news stories" segment mainly for entertainment news stories.

In addition to chatting with each other or as a group, users can also utilize it in receiving and transferring money, payments for purchases even at the grocery, news and information sharing, among others. Wechat has largely benefited from the ban on Western social media, such as YouTube and Facebook in China by filling the gap to quench thirst for news, information, and entertainment through social media among a large number of the more than one billion people in China. Wechat is evolving from a pure message tool into a multi-functional

platform, such as game center and official account payment. Wechat has been introduced into education to improve teaching and learning, such as mobile learning app, blending learning, ideological education, among others (Mao, 2014).

Hollander (2018), in a 6 March 2018 edition *Business Insider* report, said Wechat's monthly average user chat reached one billion subscribers in the last quarter of 2017. The figure represents an astronomical increase in the 195 million recorded four years earlier, 2013 and up by 12% from 889 million subscribers recorded in the third quarter of 2016.

But in spite of its mass following and uses, the global human rights watch Amnesty International (AI) in 2016 ranked Wechat and its sister application, QQ, 11 out of 11 in its overall ranking of Technology Companies on Encryption and Human Rights index. AI says that encryption protects the identity of dissidents worldwide, being a vital tool that allows journalists to communicate with dissidents; and enables NGOs to protect their works and lawyers communicate privately in "repressive" countries. It also ranked the two apps last in its message privacy. Wechat has also come under attack from the Australian government. Grigg (2018), in a report in the 11 March edition of Australia's *Financial Review*, reported that the country's Defence Department has banned its personnel from downloading and using Wechat on their mobile phones. The report says the measure was taken on suspicion that the app contains some spyware.

Similarly, earlier on 2 February 2017 edition of *Indian Express*, in a piece entitled: "Defence Ministry to Indian Armed Forces: Install Chinese Apps Immediately", Dhapola reported a similar ban by the Indian defence authorities as the Australians. Corfield (2018) said Tencents and Wechat owners deny the allegations and others bothering on storing the chat history of their users for onward transfer to Chinese authorities on demand. The author reported the company as saying it does not keep its customers' chat history as chat contents are only stored on user's mobile phone, computer, or other terminal appliance, adding that the company does not analyze the technical content of users' chat mode either.

### **Tantan**

Founded in 2014, although Tantan, a multimedia app does not command same mass appeal as Wechat, they nonetheless share a lot of similarities. Like Wechat, Tantan is used for social networking, chatting, and sharing information and news. Its major strength is its matchmaking platform through which it connects "like minds" through "like" "dislike" swiping of profile photos for social connection and interaction. With Tantan, online friends can chat, exchange voice messages, and hold live video calls. They can also exchange news and information. Like Wechat, friends on Tantan can also post the highlights of their daily lives through the "moment" section.

## **Literature Review**

Linking the new media with TPE, Antonopoulos and Dimoulas ((2016), in their study, found Web TPE at the three perceptual levels of self, friends, and other users. Administering 7,404 questionnaires on users to investigate the role of social media metrics, namely shares and likes of news articles, Antonopoulos and Dimoulas (2016) found a significant correlation between web third-person effect and articles characteristics that influence people's attitudes to share news online. Similarly, Schweisberger, Billinson, and Chock (2014) found TPE among young people who felt that low-relevance stories in the social media would have greater impact on others than on themselves. Their respondents further reported that stories that are of high-relevance will have more impact on themselves than on others. The study involved 88 undergraduate students aged

between 18 and 22 drawn from different racial backgrounds in the US. In a related study on “Me: Versus Them: Third Person Effects Among Facebook Users”, Tsay-Vogel (2016) found that TPE exists among social media users. The study showed that greater Facebook users exhibit greater tendency to report social networking sites as exerting a stronger effect on others than on themselves.

Excessive use of Wechat, social interaction, and locus of control among college students in China was the subject of investigation by Hou et al. (2017) in which they found that like other social media users, adolescent owners of Wechat account are at risk of “problematic use” of social media, such as addiction. Their study further showed that excessive use of the app has negative implications for adolescents’ studies. But Banyai et al. (2017) pointed out that due to different theoretical frameworks and psychometric assessments, the prevalence of problematic social media use might be underestimated or overestimated. The authors in their study on problematic use of social media that results from a large scale nationally representative adolescent sample informed that previous studies had reported different prevalence rates relating to problematic social media use among college students.

Golan and Joon (2016) posited that in some instances, TPE manifests in extremely dangerous circumstances among social media users. In their work on the third-person effect of ISIS recruitment propaganda, online political self-efficacy and social medium activism, they found that due to the manifestation of TPE, some people were vulnerable to being recruited by the ISIS using their strong social media campaign. In their study, which surveyed adults in the US, they found that the respondents were more likely to perceive young people as being susceptible to ISIS recruitment propaganda than the sampled population.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Encapsulated in media effect theories and hypotheses, media and communication scholars have devoted lots of resources exploring how, why, and when media effects. One of those studies centers on TPE. It proposes that media contents have more effects on others than on oneself. To measure TPE, people are usually asked two different kinds of questions with one of the questions focusing on perception of the influence of media on oneself; and the other probing the perception of media influence on others. Scholars say TPE occurs when people respond that others are more influenced by media than they are influenced by same media.

A person exposed to a persuasive communication in the mass media sees this as having a greater effect on others than on himself or herself, says Davison (1983) known widely as the originator of TPE. In his paper titled “Third- Person Effect in Communication” published in the *Opinion Quarterly* Davison based on his argument: Each individual reasons: “I will not be influenced, but they (the third persons) may be persuaded”.

Since Davison’s hypothesis, scholars from various fields in social sciences have explored his proposition from various contexts, including news, commercials, and health messages. They inform that TPE is built on two flanks, the perceptual and behavioral components, with the former focusing on the perceptual self-other discrepancy whereby people tend to perceive persuasive media messages as having greater influences on others than themselves; and behavioral consequences which may result from perception gaps (Myojung, 2018).

TPE literature at its core advances a difference between perceived effects on self and on others (Jeffers, Neuendorf, Bracken, and Atkin, 2008). Since Davison advanced his hypothesis in 1983, Ven-hwei and Ran (2002) explained that most of studies viewed the behavioral component of third person effect from the prism of magnitude perceptual bias, a psychological tendency to lose objectivity in perceptions. Scholars say perceptual bias occurs when people believe they are making valuable and unbiased judgments while, in the real sense, a

number of variables, such as social and cultural persuasions, age, and gender, interact to influence that judgment.

Johansson (2005) linked the third person effect which as stated earlier holds that people are likely to believe that others are more influenced by mass media messages than they themselves are with attitudinal or behavioral outcomes, such as governments taking steps to censor media content. Johansson (2005) posited that the hypothesis has a strong connection with the mass media in general and anti-social messages in particular. More scholars have advanced various reasons for the occurrence of third-person effect. McLeod (2017) argued that third-person effect occurs when we overestimate the effects of media on others and underestimate same for ourselves in an ego-enhancing trip or superiority complex, which he described as paternalism. Similarly, Rojas, Shah, and Faber (1996) attributed TPE to various factors, including a perceived media bias, saying 'the third-person effect is a result of people on both sides of an issue seeing the media as biased against their own opinion'.

Citing a study by Perloff in 1998 and Lepper's investigation in 1985 on same subject, Rojas and his team further attributed to media effects, including TPE to what he described as "hostile media phenomenon supported by ego involvement". Another major factor that likely contributes to TPE, says Cornners (2005), is perception of the media content itself. The author argues that if one is being influenced by mass media as an undesirable event, there is the tendency to perceive oneself as being as not being under the influence of such messages even as he or she thinks others, out of naivety, may not be able to make such a distinction.

Despite what many scholars say evidence-based manifestations of TPE, others such as Salwen and Driscoll (1997) criticized it on the ground that respondents' opinions were usually interacted with "fruitful" perceptual bias to think that news media, as in a study in the trial of O. J. Simpson where they say trial coverage exerted greater influence on others than on respondents themselves. Similarly, Perloff (1999) argued that it is not be entirely correct to advance that media have more effect on others without first appreciating the circumstances surrounding the media message. Schwarz (1999) questioned not only the framing of the questions that elicit the reported TPE but also sought to know if the respondent's understanding of the questions actually matches what the researcher had in mind. He also queried if the respondent's understanding tap the same facet of the issues and the same evaluative dimension as the researcher. Schwarz's view is also shared by Shen and Huggins (2013) as they argue that arising from the question order, methodological factors could have led to the perceived TPE.

### **Objective of Study**

Decades after Davison espoused his hypothesis, debate bothering on its validity has continued to rage among media and communication scholars. However, not much has been done to examine this hypothesis within the framework of the new communication phenomenon, the social and networking media. In China, foreigners put the social media to a variety of uses, including sharing of news and information, chatting, and keeping in touch with friends and loved ones back home. Many use it to manage boredom. This study aims to investigate how TPE hypothesis applies to these foreigners who are exposed to the Chinese social media. It also aims to investigate any correlation between TPE in the social media and social media addiction. It seeks to answer the following questions: Is the claim to TPE valid? If yes, does it apply to social media and networking app users also? Is there a nexus between TPE and social media addiction? If yes, what are the possible implications of this on the well-being of those social influenced.

### **Significance of Study**

Most of TPE-related studies have concentrated on the traditional media. The emergence of new media has broadened the scope of communication and social interaction, hence the need to expand the media studies to accommodate this new entrant. This study contributes towards filling literature gap between the new media and social networking, on the one hand, and TPE. Discourse on media effect theories will be incomplete without extending it to media. This study serves the purpose of integrating the social media into TPE discourse, a significant step in making the study of the hypothesis more inclusive of both the old and the new media.

The study is also unique because we investigated two different social media platforms unlike similar studies in the past that relied on one medium to draw their conclusion. The two-media approach offered the researchers a broader perspective and the opportunity to reconcile the findings from each medium with each other leading to conclusions. It draws attention to the relationship between TPE on social media and Internet addiction. The study is therefore not just a contribution to media effect literature but an attempt to broaden the discourse towards areas rarely researched upon by media and communication scholars. It also strengthens the TPE discourse.

### **Research Method and Scope**

We used quantitative research method in this study. We expanded our study to cover two of the leading social media and networking sites in China, Wechat and Tantan, and administered two separate questionnaires on their user. Our sample population was foreigners living in China. Wechat and Tantan are very popular among foreigners living in China because of their content and reach. We surveyed 57 confirmed Tantan users and 71 confirmed Wechat users, 128 users in total. We developed and administered two separate questionnaires one for each groups.

We matched the responses from the groups against each other. Conscious of the “question pattern” criticism of TPE, we changed the wording of the questionnaires, though the main idea we sought to extract from our respondents remained the same. The idea is to confirm if the wording of the questions has any influence on respondents answer responses. Beyond asking the respondents to merely strongly agree or disagree, we asked them to provide answers to their position. This is meant to ensure that the reasons behind reported TPE or otherwise is derived from the respondents themselves and not based on speculative deductions by the researchers. We analyzed their responses and drew our conclusions.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Wechat Data**

Wechat is one of the most widely used multi-purpose social media platforms in China. Its appeal cuts across all ages, professions, and racial backgrounds. To foreigners, it is a veritable tool for seeking news on its “top through” stories option. They use for sharing information, banking and money transfer transactions as well as chatting. Results show that 56.34% of respondents sampled in this study said they have been using the app for three years and above, while 43-66% said they have been on it for zero to two years on it.

Our results show that 57.75% of our respondents said they visit the app at least once every 10-50 minutes. They are closely followed by those who said they visit the app at least once every 51 minutes to one hour. This group represents 23.94% of our respondents. The third groups is made up of respondents who said they visit the

app at least once every two hours to 24 hours; they constitute 12.68% of our respondents; while last group, the remaining 5.63% of the respondents said they check the app at least once every one hour to two hours.

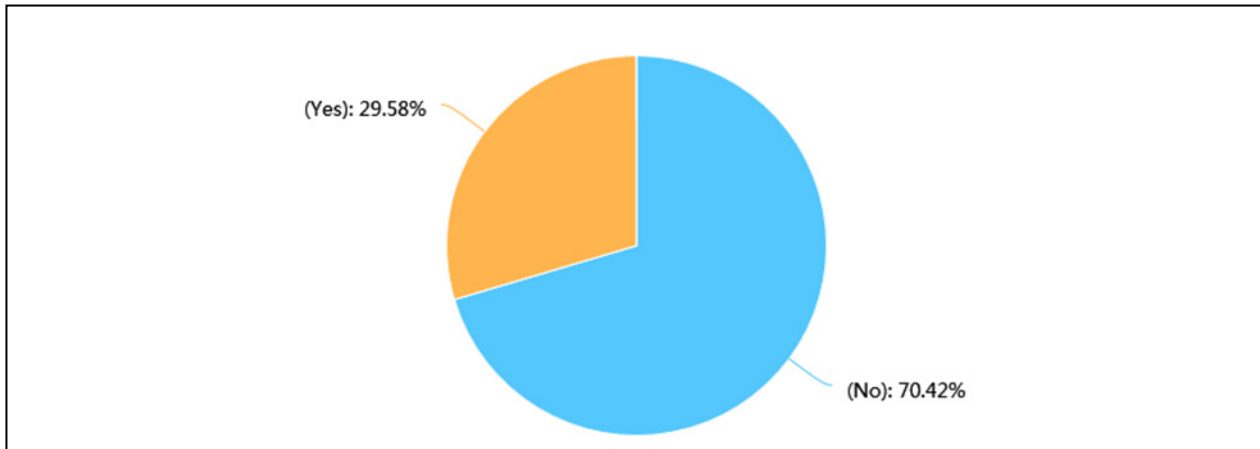

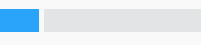
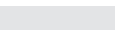



Figure 1. Wechat user's response to the possibility of being influenced by or addicted to the app.

When asked what they spend most of their time doing on Wechat, 69.01% of the respondents said they chat and share news and information, while 23.94% of them said they watch video clips and carry out money transfers. Similarly, 4.23% said they engage in the other activities not listed in the options, while 2.82% responded that they spend most of time making Wechat calls, sharing, and listening to music.

Table 1

Respondents' Wechat Use Frequency

Every 10-50 minutes	41	 57.75%
Every 51 minutes to 1 hour	17	 23.94%
Every 1:01 minutes to 2 hours	4	 5.63%
Every 2:01 hours to 24 hours	9	 12.68%
Total no. of respondents	71	

On why they cannot be addicted to influenced by Wechat, 52.11% of the respondents said it is because they do not believe everything they read on watch on Wechat, while 52.11% of them said believe others can become addicted because they lack the ability to effectively manage their time on social media hence can be recklessly hooked to it Wechat; even as 47.89% of the respondents said they are very effective in the management of their time on social media hence cannot spend more time than necessary on Wechat to warrant addiction.

**Tantan Data**

Most of the Tantan-user respondents, 82.46% of them said they used the app for zero to two years, while 17.54% of them have been on the app for three years and above. This is not a surprise because the app has been in existence for only some couples of years.

Our result shows that chatting, sharing, and reading news and information top the list of respondents' use of the app. Those in that category account for 52.63% of the respondents followed by those who use it for other

purposes, not listed in the options. They constitute 26.32% of the respondents. Those who use the app for watching movies clips, or uploading photos on “moments” as well as commenting on their contacts “moments” represent 15.79% of the respondents while those who use to listen to and share music bring up the rear, reporting 5.26% of the total number of those sampled.

When asked to justify offer reasons for their position on the possibility of why they cannot influenced by or addicted to Tantan, most of the respondents, 66.67% of them said it is because they do not believe in every information they get from the app; while 33.33% ruled out being addicted to the app because they are capable of effectively managing the time they spend on it. When the question was rephrased to indicate that “others can” become addicted to or influenced by information they get from Tantan, 82.46% of the respondents strongly agreed, while 17.54% strongly disagreed.

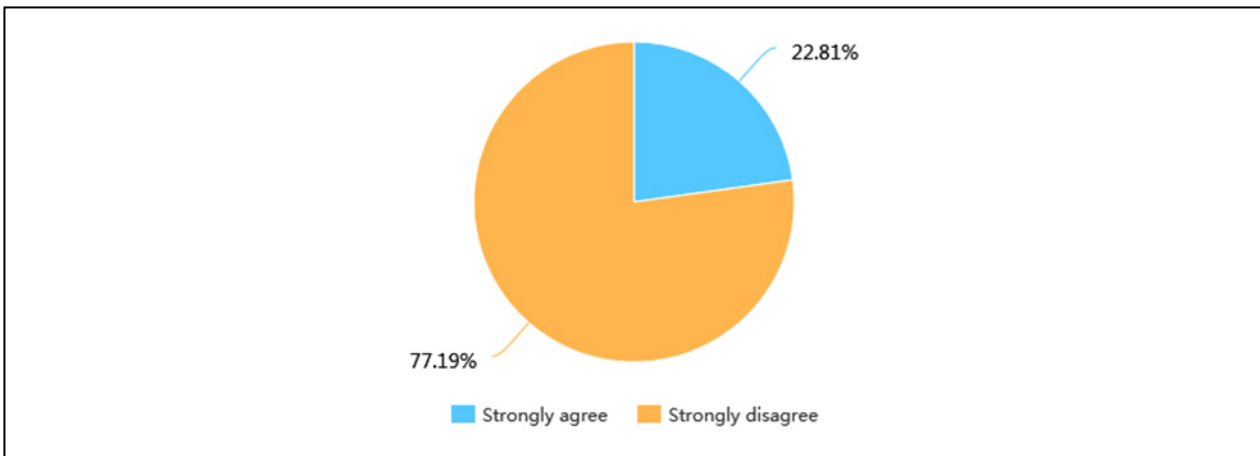
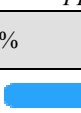
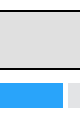


Figure 2. Tantan user’s response to the possibility of being addicted to or influenced by the app.

When the respondents were asked to offer reasons why they think others can be addicted to or influenced by Tantan, 52.63% advanced that other people do not have the ability to effectively manage their time on social media hence they can be reckless with their time usage on Tantan.

Table 2

*Tantan Users’ Justification of Others Being Influenced by or Addicted to the App*

Options	Sub-total	%
Because others can be reckless with the way the manage their time on Tantan	30	 52.63%
Because others tend to believe whatever they read/watch on Tantan	27	 47.37%
Total number of respondents	57	

Similarly, 47.37% of the respondents reported that other people tend to believe what they read or watch on Tantan. Interestingly, most of the respondents, 56.14% of them said they are satisfied with Tantan as a social media platform as against 25% who expressed dissatisfaction with the app. Most of the respondents, 85.92% of them also said they are satisfied with facilities available in Wechat while 14.08% said they are not satisfied with the app.



### Discussion/Conclusion

One of the TPE criticisms is the questionnaire wording and question order (Price & Tewksbury, 1996). Most approach is to phrase questions about oneself using strongly disagree and strongly agree; then rewording the same question about others (Hayee & Kamal, 2014). The back-to-back-self-then-others question could lead to underestimation of third-person perception conversely, the others-then-self-question order could artificially increase the third-person gap if respondents systematically use others question as baseline for answering the self question, says Dupagne, Salwen, and Bryant (1999). In the Wechat questionnaire, we asked self-others question as against other-self order used for Tantan respondents. While we used the “agree/strongly” answer option for our Tantan respondents, we applied the “yes” and “no” option for our Wechat respondents. Despite the rewordings, question order, and answer options, our findings show that foreigners who use the two social media in China not only reported TPE but also reported symptoms of addiction to the two apps.

Using the “strongly agree” option, we asked the Tantan user respondents to assess the possibility of others other themselves being addicted to or influenced by what they read, watch on, or use the app, 82.46% of the respondents said they strongly agree that others will so affected, while only 17.54% said they strongly disagree. When the same question was posed for Wechat users using the “yes” or “no” option, the result did not change, rather, the feeling of self-preservation becomes higher with 88.73% saying “yes” they believed others would be so affected while 11.27% said “no”, they do not believe so. This result confirms our hypothesis that questionnaire wording and order of questions have no influence on the reporting of TPE.

When the questions were re-worded, replacing “others” with “I” being addicted to or influenced by the Tantan, 77.19% said they strongly disagreed, while 22.81% said they strongly agreed. When same question was posed to Wechat users, 70.42% said “no”, while 29.58% said “yes”. When we asked the respondents to advance reasons for their answers, 66.67% of Tantan users said they cannot be addicted to the use of the app because they are efficient in the management of their time on the social media, while 52.11% of Wechat users said they cannot be influenced by the app because they do not believe every news or information they access there. Interestingly, 52.11% of Wechat respondents said others will be addicted to using the app because “many people can be reckless with the way they manage their time on Wechat”. These results indicate TPE among foreigners who use Wechat and Tantan.

Results from of the two groups reveal a nexus between social media addiction and TPE. While the respondents think that others will be influenced or become addicted to social media, they assume they themselves are immune from such influence. This perhaps explains why majority of the respondents from both sides spend so much time that can safely be said to be within the threshold of addiction on two platforms. As stated earlier, 42.11% of our Tantan respondents said they use their app at least once every 10 to 50 minutes, while 24.56% said they do same in at least every 51 minutes to one hour. Wechat study group users reported even a higher percentage, with 57.75% reporting same frequency of usage while 23.94% reported to do same between every 51 minutes to one hour, an exposure that puts them at the risk of addiction, according to Al-Menayes (2015) who posited that the higher the amount of time spent online the greater the extent of the symptoms of Internet addiction.

Siddiqui and Singh (2016), in a study, drew attention to implications of spending lots of time on social media, warning that one of the negative effects of social media is its ability to make people become addicted to

using it, with people who spend lots of time on the platform reporting diversion of focus and loss of concentration on any particular task. Such people, they say, risk a weakened social life and they exhibit the tendency to compromise established family relationships, for instance, in pursuit of new social partners. Being hooked to social media or wanting to always be online on social media as reported in our study, according to Sahin (2017), are manifestations of social media addiction, a development, he said, should be of concern to social sciences scholars. Singh, Amiri, and Sabbarwal (2017) described the phenomenon as over-utilization of the social media which they said expose the users to mental and physical health challenges, such as mental fatigue, strain, anxiety, and panic syndrome. Findings from this study support the TPE hypothesis. It also reveals the nexus between TPE among social media users and Internet addiction, with potential negative health and social implications for victims.

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