Interview Report: Communication Channels Amongst International Students at the University of Michigan

Christina Li
3/8/2020

Introduction

Our group studied communication channels among international students at the University of Michigan. The project spanned two weeks and consisted of formulating the research questions, recruiting interviewees that were international students at the University of Michigan, creating an interview protocol to provide direction to our interviews, conducting interviews, aggregating and analyzing the data through affinity diagramming, creating personas and narratives, and suggesting recommendations for product development and app design for communication channels.

In this study, our objective was to develop a deeper understanding of the perspective of an international student and the role of communication channels in their lives through conducting interviews so that we could glean insight into UX features of these communication channels after analyzing and synthesizing the data gathered from the interviews. To provide a clear direction of our project, we focused on two main research questions: How do international students communicate with their network? What factors influence international students' decision to use a communication channel? Upon understanding the answers to these questions, it could provide insight into how UX designers could improve the design of communication channels to better suit the needs of international students who want to stay in touch with friends and family from their country of origin.

Methods

Data collection

Our target population was international students at the University of Michigan. For our recruitment plan, each member in our group interviewed three international students that we knew through classes or other student organizations. I interviewed a male student from Brazil, a female student from Hong Kong, and a female student from China. Another group member interviewed a male student from India and two male students from Estonia. The third group member interviewed a female student from Nigeria, a female student from Dubai, and a male student from Bahrain. The fourth group member interviewed a male student from France, a male student from Taiwan, and a male student from Zimbabwe. The fifth group member interviewed a female student from China, a female student from Singapore, and a male student from China. We set aside 20-30 minutes for in-person interviews and recorded each interview. To prepare for the interviews, we created an interview protocol, a list of eighteen questions and a couple follow-up questions to use as guidance for key topics we wanted to discuss with the participants (Appendix A).

For our data analysis, we printed out our interviews and cut out each response to group together into an affinity diagram (Appendix B). For our affinity diagram, we first wrote codes on blue post-its for the common ideas that came from the interviews. Then, on green post-its, we wrote insights based on the codes. Finally, on pink post-its we wrote recommendations based on our insights. This affinity diagram helped us to synthesize and organize the ideas gathered from the 150 pages of interviews and analyze the patterns and themes that we found across everyone's interviews.

Findings

Summary Results

Three personas were used to capture the major common themes and pain points of our interviewees. By understanding their behaviors, motivations, and thought processes, it could provide valuable insight into how to design a communication app to best fit user's needs.

Persona 1: Michelle, phone addict

Quote: "I think another thing I like about WeChat is that you can highly personalize it. You can name your conversation and have nicknames for people. You can change your chat background. You can also send very personalized stickers that you make on the app."

Michelle is originally from China, and she is currently a senior at the University of Michigan studying International Studies and Communications. She is very active on campus; she is vice president of the Chinese Student Association, a writer for a fashion magazine, a board member for a medical relief organization that fundraises for kids in the rural parts of China, and part of a korean dance group. She uses group chats on WeChat for Chinese Student Association, the medical relief organization, and her dance group because

a lot of the other members of those organizations are also international students, so they are more accustomed to that app.

Michelle came to the US for high school, so she is knowledgeable about American culture and social issues, but also values staying connected with the trends and news of what is going on in China. She follows a lot of blogs and group pages on WeChat that post about the news, fashion, and TV shows. She also cares a lot about staying in touch with her network of friends, family, and previous classmates in China, so she is constantly messaging people and creating stickers and sending them to people. She is willing to use as many apps as needed to keep up with friendships in China and the US and will use different apps for different purposes. For example, she uses Snapchat as a low maintenance way of keeping in touch with friends in the US but will also use iMessage or Messenger to direct message them. And although she uses WeChat for her student organizations that involve other international students, she will use Groupme for group projects in her classes.

She video calls her parents for important things, such as paying taxes or summer internships, and to catch up about every other week. On Wechat, she has a lot of group chats; one with just her nuclear family, one with her dad's side of the family, one with her mom's side of the family, one with all of her extended family, one with her middle school class, one with her church youth group, etc. With friends, she has a group chat with her close group of friends that she is very active in but also has a lot of one-on-one messages with friends too. She will also post several pictures on WeChat about once a month to recap the highlights of that past month. Overall, she prefers WeChat over any other app, because it allows for personalization for many features. She uses other apps, such as Messenger, Groupme, and Slack because a lot of her friends that grew up in the US already used them, but she wished they allowed for more customization within those apps.

Narrative scenario: Michelle goes on Wechat during class to respond to the Chinese Student Association group chat regarding their upcoming bubble tea fundraiser event and then realizes she needs to respond to her dad's message that he sent last night asking how her classes were going. When she clicks on the chat with her dad, she realizes that the background theme was still the same one from high school, so she decides to change it. Then, feeling nostalgic, she goes into her stickers and sends a sticker she had created from the last photo that she and her dad took together before she left China to come to the US for high school. Then, she checks the blogs that she follows on WeChat. Her favorite political commentator just posted a new blog post, so she spends ten minutes reading it, and then a notification from Snapchat pops up and she sends a quick selfie back in response. While she is on Snapchat, she responds to all of her snap streaks, which are all over 200 days long. Upon seeing a selfie of her childhood best friend, she wants to ask her how she has been doing, so Michelle switches to Messenger to message her.

Persona 2: Emma, ambitious hard-working student
Quote: "I like how Wechat has all of the functions that I need in one app, like it has functions similar to messenger, facetime, instagram, and facebook"
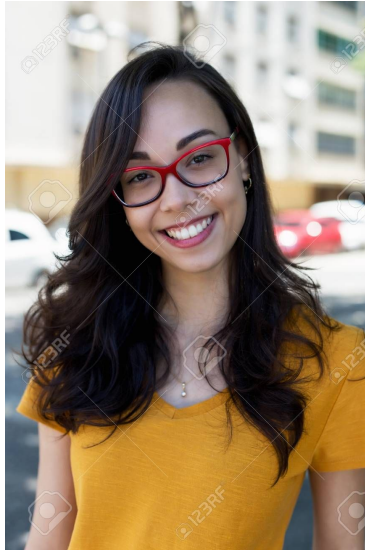
Emma is originally from Hong Kong and came to the US for college. She is currently a sophomore at the University of Michigan studying biomedical engineering on the pre-med track. She spends about 30 hours a week doing research and 6 hours a week volunteering at the hospital. Any free time she has is spent studying for exams. She primarily uses WeChat to stay in touch with her parents and video calls them every other Saturday morning while she is eating breakfast. She is part of a couple group chats with her middle school and high school classmates but mutes notifications from them because she does not have time to read all of their messages and never feels the need to update them on her life. She only catches up with her closest high school friends during breaks, because she is too busy for long conversations during the school semesters and does not like to drag out conversations over a long period of time.

Emma always keeps her phone on do not disturb mode during classes and research. While she is studying, she generally does not check her phone because she sees it as a distraction. If she sees a notification pop up on her screen, she will finish whatever she is working on first before responding. She prioritizes checking school-related apps over apps that are more for talking with friends, so she checks Groupme and Slack first, because those are mostly used for group projects for classes and her research lab. She enjoys using Slack for her research lab, because she likes that Slack allows her to stay very organized. They separate different topics into different channels, and she can keep conversations separate within the same channel by using the threads feature. This way, it reduces the number of irrelevant messages that she needs to read through before reaching what she is looking for.

She is always apologizing to friends for responding a day late to their messages. She prefers using iMessage and Messenger to make plans in advance, because she knows she

will not have time to check those apps often throughout the day. She particularly likes that Messenger allows her to mark messages as unread so that she can remember to go back to them later if she needs more time to respond. Overall, Emma is a very hard-working student who is mainly focused on her studies. She lives a very organized lifestyle where technology is used as a means to help with schoolwork and career-related activities rather than as a hindrance or a distraction. She does not care about maintaining an online presence and is annoyed that she has so many apps to keep up with. Thus, if she had to choose an app as her favorite, she would choose WeChat because it combines a lot of features and she appreciates that the personalization features are available even if she does not have the time to use them that frequently.

Narrative scenario: As Emma is typing up a lab report at her research lab, she sees a notification on her phone pop up from Groupme and rolls her eyes. She does not want to mute the group chat because she is scared she is going to miss something important and she does not want to come off like she does not care, but she still feels very annoyed by the constant notifications. Then, a message from a friend pops up on iMessage asking if she wants to get lunch. She goes back to her lab report that she was working on to finish the last paragraph and then responds to her friend suggesting that they get pizza together. She forgets about the message on Groupme until the next day because she opened it and had no option to mark it as unread.

Persona 3: Matthew, chill athletic student who loves memes
Quote: "It was frustrating because I feel like the apps here in the US are so buggy like groupme and oh yea slack. It's so confusing."

        Matthew is originally from Brazil and recently came to the US for college. He is currently a junior at the University of Michigan studying computer science. On campus, he is very involved in his intramural soccer team and intramural frisbee team. He is still

adjusting to culture in the US but does not care too much about keeping up with the news or social and political issues. He primarily uses his phone to keep in touch with family and friends back home and to look at and share memes. He uses Messenger, iMessage, Slack and Groupme the most to communicate with his friends on his sports teams and classmates but uses WhatsApp to keep in touch with people back home in Brazil.

He checks all of his social media and communication apps frequently but does not talk in them that much. On WhatsApp, he will usually just talk to his parents and brothers in Portugese and occasionally talk in group chats with friends. He talks with his brothers mainly when something funny happens or when he sees a funny meme. With his parents, conversations revolve more around school, internships, and career. Matthew will video call back home but does not have a set schedule. Whenever he has time on the weekends, he will call, which is sometimes every other week but sometimes closer to once a month. Video calls are reserved for more serious conversations, especially updates about summer internships. At first, it was hard to account for time zone differences, but over time, he got accustomed to it and it does not bother him anymore.

Matthew was very annoyed that he had to learn how to use so many new apps when he came to the US. There are some apps, particularly Groupme, that are a lot slower and more buggy than what he was used to when using Whatsapp and that really bothers him. Overall, he still prefers Whatsapp because it allows for more personalization, such as the feature that allows him to create stickers from pictures of him and his family and friends, but he recognizes the value in having different apps for different purposes. He uses Groupme for fun conversations with his sports teammates and group projects, Slack is for larger organization conversations with other sports teams, and iMessage is for direct messaging close friends and Messenger is for direct messaging friends that he does not feel close enough to yet to ask for their number.

Narrative scenario: It has been a long day of coding and Matthew is getting ready to go to his IM soccer game. On his way over, he scrolls through his group chat with his brothers on WhatsApp where his youngest brother was telling them about a funny incident that happened with his math teacher earlier that day. He responds with a sticker that is a photo of his brother making a funny facial expression. Then, he messages in his group chat with his parents, updating them on his latest interview with a local startup tech company and asks to video chat them the upcoming Saturday. Then, he checks the Groupme with his IM soccer team to make sure that the game is still happening. Seeing that everyone liked the message saying that they are going makes him excited and he likes it too then continues on his way over.

Key Findings

The personas and their narratives are based on common themes that we found while creating our affinity diagram. In summary, in regards to our first research question about how international students communicate with their network back home, we found that they contact their families about every other week. Several respondents responded with "I call at least once every two weeks" and "I call them more during the weekends", which is more frequently than how often they talk to their friends from their home country. Also, students will choose video chat over voice call or messaging if they want to have a serious conversation and video calling is usually for family rather than friends. One respondent explained that "when it comes to more serious topics or topics that take more discussion, like taxes or bills, we would tend to make a video call." Lastly, time differences are not a major hindrance to account for because as one respondent said, "it's kind of habit by now because when it's night here it's morning there."

In regards to our second research question on what factors that influence international students' decisions to use a communication channel, we found that blocked applications and additional costs limit people's choices for communication channels. One interviewee explained that her parents do not use Messenger "because Facebook is not allowed in China, so [her] parents can't use Messenger." Also, people are influenced to use certain applications because a lot of other people are already using it. When one interviewee was explaining why her student organization uses WeChat, she said "I think if you are an international student, you usually talk to other international students through WeChat because that's what people are used to." Moreover, people prefer applications that combine a lot of functions. For example, one interviewee raved about how " on WeChat you can buy plane tickets, movie tickets, pay your bill, pay your utilities, get takeout easy, split bills." Lastly, people choose apps with different features based on their audience. One interviewee explained that, "You just don't want to complicate things so then I only use certain apps to talk to certain people. I don't want there to be a scenario where I'm talking to overlapping groups of people on multiple apps."

Two major findings that relate to design recommendations were that people prefer applications that reduce the number of clicks to reach the screen to connect with someone and that options to personalize features on the app improves user experience. One interviewee explained that "Slack is so confusing because there's a lot of channels and it takes a lot of time and clicks to sort through all of the messages to find what you want" and another interviewee loved that "on WeChat you can highly personalize everything. You can name your conversation, you can have nicknames for other people. You can change your chat background, and send very personalized stickers."

Through understanding the ways that international students communicate with their network in their home country and what features international students enjoy using

in their current communication apps, it provides guidance for what to include when designing or improving a communication channel app in the future.

Recommendations

From the themes related to our first research question, we recommend that communication channel apps understand their competitor landscape because it is clear that there are a lot of options out there and adding another app on the market may not be what users want, or they might need something particularly unique that would make them choose that app over others. For example, knowing the frequency at which students communicate with family and friends back home and knowing that sometimes it is difficult to stick with a set schedule could spark inspiration to create a notification system to remind students to call home that other apps have not yet implemented.

Also, seeing that people choose apps that are already widely used, we recommend that apps market themselves internationally and possibly even incentivize referrals to grow their user base. Furthermore, because people prefer apps with many functions combined, apps should add features that complement the communication aspect, such as games, and online shopping to keep users engaged on the app longer. Apps should also have customizable features, such as stickers and background color options, so that users feel more personally connected with the app when they are using it. There should also be a very simple and organized user interface so that navigating to any important feature does not require more than three clicks. Lastly, communication apps should do regular user testing to understand their users to be able to tailor the app's functions to their needs. For example, understanding the features that people generally like about your app would provide an avenue for further improvements for future releases so that people would enjoy the app even more and continue using it.

Conclusion

Our project focused on looking at communication channels that international students use to keep in touch with their friends and family back home and understanding what features attracted them to choose certain apps over others. We used an affinity wall to analyze our qualitative data and then created personas to understand the needs of international students when using an app to communicate with others. Finally, we found some common themes, such as people enjoying personalization options and appreciating apps that combined many functionalities, which help to drive recommendations for how a communication app should be designed.

Communication Channels Amongst International Students at the University of Michigan

Interview Protocol

Edited by: AJ Carter, SoJung Ham, Christina Li, Sadhana Ramaseshadri, Jessica Zhang

Target social group: International students at the University of Michigan
Well-defined activity: Communication Channels

Project Timeline:
Sunday 1/23 - Have all three interviews transcribed and in the drive ready for analysis
Sunday 1/23 - Meeting at 7:30pm for affinity diagramming

Recruitment Plan:

➢ Demographic: University of Michigan undergraduate international students
➢ Geographic: Ann Arbor, Michigan
➢ Interviews: In-person

Research Questions:

RQ1. How do international students communicate with their network?
RQ2. What factors influence international students' decision to use a communication channel?

Introduction:

1. Short small talk (e.g. How are you today?)
2. Thank you for coming to talk with us. Do you mind being called by your first name?
3. Brief introduction of the interviewers and the project (My name is [NAME] and I'm working with a group of four other students in the School of Information to conduct this research project. We are conducting a study to learn how international students communicate with their network at

home. We are particularly interested in understanding how technology can be leveraged to mediate global communication.)
4. Let them know that they can stop the interview at any time and that their data will be kept confidential.
5. Ask for consent if they can be audio recorded

Interview Questions:

Communication channels

➔ How do you communicate with your network in your country of origin?
➔ What kind of social media platforms do you use to keep in touch?
➔ Why do you prefer using this platform over others?
➔ What features do you look for when choosing a communication platform?
➔ What kind of things do you share, if any?
➔ Did existing communication channels influence your decision to study abroad?

Content of Conversation

➔ Tell me about a typical conversation and how long do they last?
➔ How often do you communicate in English vs in your native language?
➔ What kind of things do you talk about /hear about?

Frequency of Communication

➔ How often do you call back home?
➔ How do you navigate or account for time differences?
➔ Do you follow a schedule when communicating?

Audiences

➔ What audiences do you communicate with? With whom do you communicate with on these channels?
➔ Do you use different channels for separate audiences?
➔ Do you use the same communication channel for friends and family back home?
➔ Do you use separate communication channels when talking with U-M friends compared when you communicate with friends from your home?

Technology

➔ What kind of technology/devices do you have/use?
➔ Can you talk me through your thought process when choosing to video call, audio call, or text someone in your country of origin?

Follow-up questions ideas:

➔ Can you tell me more about that?
➔ How did that make you feel?
➔ When you said _____, what do you mean by that?
➔ Can you tell me more about your presence/behaviors/interactions on [website or app used]?
➔ What made you decide to do….? [Try to avoid asking "why"]

Things to keep in mind:

● Listen more and talk less
● Try to avoid leading questions

After the Interview

1. Would you like to see the research results when we are finished?
2. Thank you for your time!

Appendix B.