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Social Support via WeChat? Explorations of Chinese Rural–Urban Women’s Happiness

Linxin Wang

School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, Cardiff CF10 1FS, UK;
wanglinxin620@outlook.com

Abstract: Employing a social support perspective allows us to examine the experiences of migrant women in assembly lines using WeChat to explore the relationship between social support and their subjective well-being. The paper takes advantage of the digital ethnography method to investigate Chinese rural–urban women using WeChat in Tianjin, China. Utilizing a snowball sampling approach to search for 47 interviewees, this study conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews. The research discovered that activities organized by companies, digital information, and virtual communication, to some extent, provide Chinese migrant women with social support, consequently positively influencing their subjective well-being. It is undeniable that the use of WeChat seems to conceal the inequality, imbalance, and many other issues behind this phenomenon. Even so, this discovery will help researchers investigate migrant women’s urban inclusion and mental health in the future.

Keywords: social support; female migrant workers; WeChat

1. Introduction

When we talk about migration, the first thing that comes to mind is international migration. However, this article focuses on the effects of migration within a country, such as internal migrants in China since the 1980s. China’s reform and open-up policy started in the 1980s and was a crucial milestone in China. The ‘reform’ emphasized economic reform, whilst the ‘opening up’ focused not only on opening the door to the outside world but also on opening up to the domestic market. More importantly, restrictions on migration were lifted in 1984 and replaced by a more relaxed regulatory environment, which led to an “immediate surge” in migrants (Anderson et al. 2003, p. 178). In accordance with the available data, the number of migrant workers increased rapidly to over 292 million by the end of 2021, with female migrant workers making up 35.9% of the total (Chinese National Bureau of Statistics 2022).

Driven by rural–urban disparities and economic opportunities, more and more female migrant workers are leaving their hometowns for cities. Some are daughters or mothers who have to endure the pain of being parted from their families, along with the loneliness and difficulties associated with living in different urban areas. For example, migrant workers often face challenges in unfamiliar cities, such as low incomes, unstable jobs (K. W. Chan 2010), and a lack of social connections (Ye and Chen 2020). However, the widespread use of WeChat in China provides instant messaging and information access and offers convenient payment methods (Zhang et al. 2017). Through WeChat, migrant workers can receive emotional support from long-distant relatives or close friends, obtain information resources, and even build new support networks with colleagues and friends.



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Although 95.6% of migrant workers in urban areas can access the Internet ([Chinese National Bureau of Statistics 2022](#)) to cope with anxiety and helplessness and help fulfil their hopes and dreams, it is worth discussing what specific role WeChat plays as a tool for social support in this process. Given WeChat's unique position as both a communication and support platform, understanding its impact on migrant workers' lives can reveal critical insights into their well-being. Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between WeChat usage and the subjective well-being of female migrant workers from the perspective of social support. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does factory-provided social support translate through WeChat to influence the happiness of female migrant workers?
2. How does interpersonal communication on WeChat provide social support to female migrant workers, and how does it influence their subjective well-being?
3. What role does 'playing around' on WeChat play in providing social support and influencing the happiness of migrant women?

The significance of this paper is that it fills a gap, particularly in the study of social support for Chinese rural–urban women in the digital era. Since the era of social media usage began, there has been a lack of exploration of sense of achievement among female migrant workers. More importantly, this research shows the status of female migrant workers and points out the need for further studies in the directions of urban inclusion and mental health for these migrant women.

2. Literature Reviews

Social support consists of information support, esteem support, network support, emotional aids, and tangible assistance ([Coulson et al. 2007](#); [Sahay and Wei 2022](#)). Studies have shown that social support can be given and received through messages and that the most popular forms of social support are information and emotional support ([Coulson et al. 2007](#)). Some scholars have explored how social relationships can afford social support in the context of stressful moments ([Saltzman et al. 2020](#)). In addition, some receive comfort, emotional, and esteem support, as well as a sense of belonging, when accessing another individual's resources ([Sahay and Wei 2022](#)). As a result, social support, to some extent, 'solves practical problems and relieves burden' ([Oktavianus and Lin 2023](#), p. 1180).

More importantly, social support has been regarded as a protective umbrella for dealing with negative effects on mental health ([Szkody et al. 2021](#); [Szkody and McKinney 2019](#)), which is particularly significant in migrant groups. Social support occurs among family members as well as coworkers, peers, supervisors, or organizational members ([Sahay and Wei 2022](#)). The first argument emphasizes that social support occurs through interpersonal communication among migrants. A study discovered that coworkers or peers have provided significant social support in coping with crisis situations ([Sahay and Wei 2022](#)). For example, social support has been used to buffer migrants' stressful experiences ([Sanchez et al. 2019](#)). Women also cope with their negative emotions by expressing themselves on social media sites, which was impossible to do before the era of social media ([Wang and Sandner 2019](#)). [Ye and Chen \(2020\)](#) discovered that family support contributes to better health conditions among domestic workers. [Ju et al. \(2019\)](#) found that migrant workers using WeChat try to find 'communal support from family members and friends', thereby acquiring happiness and a sense of belonging ([Ju et al. 2019](#), p.14).

Secondly, incidental learning has been found to be an important factor in social support among migrants ([Ju et al. 2019](#); [Sun 2016](#)). For example, some migrants' knowledge has been obtained through digital devices, sometimes influencing decision making about an issue ([Oktavianus and Lin 2023](#)). Research has found that rural migrants rely on digital devices as their main source of learning ([Luo and Seeberg 2022](#)). [Ju et al. \(2019\)](#) found

that migrant workers usually read and post positive messages through WeChat to acquire the energy they need to continue fighting fatigue. They also use WeChat daily to obtain new information and enhance their living environment (Ju et al. 2019). Their dependence on WeChat has helped them overcome the challenges posed by migration and feel more comfortable in their new environment (Ju et al. 2019).

Thirdly, there has been an exploration of organizational support for migrant workers. Most studies focus on negative and adverse aspects, such as labor exploitation (Blecher 2010; Gao 2021; Luo et al. 2022; Van Meeteren and Wiering 2019), rights protection (K. W. Chan 2010; Che et al. 2020; He and Huang 2015; Hernández 2020; Lan 2022), and mental health (Liem et al. 2020; Yang et al. 2020). Hence, there are few studies on Chinese female migrant workers acquiring social support from either organizations or companies. Overall, these three arguments make it evident that according to these research findings, the establishment of social support plays a pivotal role in the realm of migration research, particularly in relation to mental health outcomes. However, current migrant studies have rarely made use of a social support framework to explore rural–urban women’s well-being. Therefore, it is necessary to make use of social support theory as a perspective to discuss this issue.

3. Social Support

Social support has become a vital theoretical perspective in psychology, sociology, and health studies since the 1970s. The theory stresses that social support, whether it is emotional comfort or material help, has a positive impact on individuals’ well-being (Cohen and Wills 1985). In the past, social support mainly occurred in intimate relationships, families, well-established relationships, and acquaintances. This was particularly prominent in migrant groups in the context of Chinese culture. Rural–urban people in China relied on social networks among kinship, sibblingship, and relationships with birth-place fellows as the most supportive and reliable social relations (Liu et al. 2012). However, with the increasing popularity of mobile networks, social support has expanded into virtual space. For example, migrants can obtain social support through their mobile phones, such as through online support groups or online social networks. This has become a significant source of emotional support or informational support (Chen and Choi 2011). Therefore, this section mainly addresses social support and its manifestation within Chinese culture and social contexts.

Scholars have proposed multiple different dimensions of social support (Cohen and McKay 1984; Cohen and Wills 1985; Langford et al. 1997). For example, Cohen and McKay (1984) put forward three types of social support, including tangible, appraisal, and emotional support. Cohen and Wills (1985) emphasized esteem support, informational support, and instrumental support. Langford et al. (1997) underlined that social support encompasses emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and appraisal support. My research follows the perspective of Langford et al. to explore the topic further because it is representative of social support and appropriate in the context of migration and mobile social media. Hereafter, these four types of social support will be elucidated, referring to emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental support.

This section illustrates the four types of social support: emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental. Firstly, emotional support comprises care for others, love, trust, and empathy (Cronenwett 1985), as well as esteem, appreciation acquired, and reciprocity (Cobb 1976). Emotional support is essential for migrant workers, who often face isolation and discrimination, because they need feelings of “liking, admiration, respect, and love” (Langford et al. 1997, p. 96). Secondly, informational support contributes to helping individuals define, understand, and cope with certain problems and deal with dilemmas

or problem-solving (Cohen and Wills 1985; Sarason et al. 1990). Informational support helps migrant workers develop a positive outlook and relief from puzzling or problematic things, thereby motivating them to manage their practical concerns in work and life. Differently from informational support, appraisal support is not about problem-solving but stresses self-evaluation based on the communication of information (House 1981). This type of support includes providing positive comments or feedback and constructive criticism to migrant workers, thereby promoting their self-worth. For those working far from home, appraisal support can significantly boost confidence and resilience, especially in challenging situations. Finally, instrumental support is also called material support or tangible support. It involves 'financial aid, material resources, and needed services' (Cohen and Wills 1985, p. 313). Instrumental support can directly solve certain problems or provide people who receive it with opportunities for relaxation and recreation through specific activities (Cohen and Wills 1985). For example, this type of support helps migrant workers fulfil their essential needs and makes them focus on career advancement.

In addition, social support has been divided into formal and informal social support. The former emphasizes that social support comes from public services (such as institutions, communities, and organizations) and professionals; the latter underlines support from one's families and friends (Baig and Chang 2020). On the one hand, the effects of social support on migrants and their well-being "may differ by its sources" (Shiba et al. 2016, p. 623). For example, support from family members may provide more effective emotional support (Shiba et al. 2016). On the other hand, formal support, like services from institutions, can "reinforce and strengthen informal support" (House et al. 1988, p. 314). For example, information acquired from official accounts on WeChat, such as legal rights, might strengthen connections among migrant workers, thereby boosting their mutual assistance.

However, informal support sometimes does not seem to provide solutions to the problems faced by migrant women because the 'deep-rooted culture of women's conventional roles may still hinder women's help seeking' (Baig and Chang 2020, p. 787). Whether these individuals express their problems depends on their families' reactions, and their families may sometimes hinder them from seeking formal help (Calnan 1983; Yoshioka et al. 2003; Ullman and Filipas 2001). For example, a study found that migrant women did not discuss their abusive situations or seek any help, even though their communities might offer suggestions, because they felt obligated to protect their families' 'face' and were worried that the situations might spread to their relatives (Tonsing 2014).

Finally, the importance of social support should be discussed in relation to migrants, mobile phone or social media usage, and well-being, with four aspects considered in the context of Chinese culture and society. Firstly, family is the primary source of social support. Female workers use social media to contact distant family members or friends when they encounter difficulties (Gong and Bharj 2022). Also, as rural women migrate to cities for work, left-behind children often rely heavily on family support and care. Secondly, social support is derived from social networks. People maintain connections through exchanges and assistance on social media, gaining various forms of guidance and advice in their work and life. Thirdly, formal support from the government or companies, as well as from groups like worker organizations, provides emotional support and platforms for information exchange for migrant workers. Finally, within Chinese social culture, social support includes gaining respect, praise, and recognition. For example, *the Economist*, in 2017, reported the story of a woman named *Yusu Fan* (The Economist 2017). This rural female migrant worker caused a stir, with her autobiographical work being spread abroad online using the WeChat App. She not only fulfilled her personal achievements but also brought honour to her family. Overall, social media for formal or informal social support offers migrants with "the practical and emotional resources" they need, thereby promot-

ing one's well-being (Udwan et al. 2020, p. 5). For example, social support promotes the idea that migrants "feel loved, valued", and it also offers assistance to individuals who feel they are under pressure or facing challenges (Putri and Nursanti 2020, p. 123). Meanwhile, information being shared, personal experiences, objective evaluations, and empathy contribute to enhancing an individual's sense of self-efficacy in managing their experiences (Oh and Lee 2012).

4. Methods

The purpose of this section is to outline the methods used, including in-depth interviews and snowball sampling, data collection, and the data analysis approach, which was a thematic analysis. First of all, the methods of in-depth interviews and snowball sampling will be addressed. Semi-structured interviews are a method of performing in-depth interviews (Al-Saggaf and Williamson 2004). The interviewers make a detailed inquiry or adjust questions based on the interviewees' responses. This is important for female migrant workers because they have diverse personal experiences and backgrounds and may need more time and guidance to fully express their thoughts and feelings. More importantly, semi-structured face-to-face interviews help in deeply exploring female migrant workers' experiences and feelings, rather than merely addressing surface-level phenomena, thereby obtaining valuable insights. Indeed, semi-structured interviews contribute to allowing interviewees to put forward new issues when they understand a topic; on the other hand, this method is helpful for exploring, deeply understanding, and obtaining clear answers when dealing with complex issues by using spontaneous questions (Wilson 2014). However, one limitation is that the interviewer should be highly skilled and experienced, and it takes a lot of time to collect the data.

In the process of carrying out face-to-face interviews, I also integrated the snowball sampling method into this research. A necessary condition for the application of snowball sampling is that the members of the minority group know each other (Kalton and Anderson 1986). On the one hand, the snowball method starts by addressing a private connection or an informant and then expands to include a greater network (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). On the other hand, snowball sampling contributes to building interpersonal trust. Snowball samples are usually recommended by "friends or acquaintances" (David and Mistiaen 2009, p. 340). It is true that snowball sampling is the most suitable sampling method because it is difficult to find specific population members, especially for the sample of migrant workers in this study. It is convenient to find respondents in a targeted manner. Indeed, finding enough interviewees for the research is the prominent advantage of snowball sampling. However, snowball sampling's limitation lies in the requirement that the sample units must have a certain connection and be willing to maintain and provide this relationship; otherwise, it will influence both the application and effectiveness of this survey method.

Following the discussion of the methods, the data collection explanation should include the following elements. In this study, all participants came from Chinese rural areas and were working in manufacturing in Tianjin, China. Tianjin is the largest coastal open city in northern China. Many new factories have been developed in this area. Compared with other industries, manufacturing can offer much higher incomes to female migrant workers. But employees work long hours in a relatively closed environment, lacking communication with people outside the factories. Their busy schedules mean that their use of mobile phones is greatly limited during their working hours. In other words, they do not have enough free time to communicate with their family and friends throughout the day or just to do their own thing. All of these factors may lead them to rely on social media even

more. In China, WeChat is superior to all other social media networks in the public eye, affording the most widespread and convenient services in daily life (Zhang et al. 2017).

The use of social media with the WeChat app has much significance when exploring Chinese female migrant workers. The public, through WeChat, not only express their opinions or views through tools such as voice messaging, images, and text but also acquire information and communicate with others. WeChat has become a necessary part of much human online communication in many people's daily lives, especially for female migrant workers who have left their hometowns. WeChat has built a bridge between these female migrant workers and their families, colleagues, and friends. Whilst it is true that female migrant workers have less opportunity to gather with their families, WeChat plays a pivotal role in maintaining the relationships between distant family members, relatives, and friends. Moreover, the virtual cyberspace may not reveal the individual feelings and opinions of female migrant workers, but WeChat helps them acquire needed information. There is no doubt that the use of WeChat can directly affect female migrant workers' daily lives and may even help them to build happiness.

The study focuses on female migrant workers aged 18 to 37 years old because they make up the largest group of migrant women. In these face-to-face interviews, I acquired basic information, including their birthplace; hometown; age; work experience; family status; and WeChat usage. It was particularly important to consider the use of WeChat in the interview process. The in-depth questions included, for example, the following: (1) Are the communications limited to daily greetings or do you engage in more in-depth discussions about you feelings? (2) Do you use WeChat to access resources that are beneficial to you? If so, which types of resources do you prioritize? What effects did it have on you? (3) Did you post something on the WeChat Moments? If so, please provide a detailed explanation. And why did you post something on your WeChat Moments? Overall, in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with 47 female migrant workers. As all participants were working and living in China, the data were translated from Mandarin to English.

Finally, all data underwent thematic analysis. I tracked the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), generating meaningful patterns as a result of developing themes via the data set (El Said 2017). Firstly, I need to familiarize myself with the data from the face-to-face interviews. Secondly, initial codes were generated, and it was necessary to check the relevance of each code (Braun and Clarke 2006). This not only helps identify interesting features of the data set (Braun and Clarke 2006) but also signs of "relevant words, phrases, sentences, or sections" that are "repeated in several places" (El Said 2017, p. 734). For example, some female migrant workers emphasized Christmas gifts, feeling relief, and online resource sharing. Thirdly, looking for themes was an essential stage in the research. This meant analyzing codes and considering how different codes merge in association with overarching themes as well as building mind maps (Braun and Clarke 2006). One theme was the aspect of social support, which was then divided into three aspects, including the working environment, interpersonal communications, and 'playing around' on WeChat. Fourthly, it was necessary to review these themes. It contributes to further refining the extracted themes and analyzing themes. The data sets were relevant to each theme. The fifth stage was needed for defining and naming these themes. Finally, a report was generated. At this stage, there were final opportunities for analysis and choosing vivid and fascinating examples associated with the research questions and the literature.

5. Social Support from Companies

I combined the collected data and the theoretical framework discussed previously for a detailed analysis. The first argument focuses on migrant women's subjective well-being

and social support acquired from their factories. A female migrant worker (Participant 36)¹ was occupied with WeChat marketing after work. She told me the following:

As soon as my sales' performances reached a certain level, I was fortunate enough to be selected by the company to travel to Thailand. Unlike my friends from my hometown, I have a chance to travel abroad with my family as a result of my own efforts. I posted some travel photos, short videos, and texts on my WeChat moment. Seeing their envious eyes as a result of my free opportunities, I felt all my hard work was worthwhile.

This female migrant worker's subjective well-being came from posting a free day trip experience organized by the company on WeChat Moments. Moreover, this post on WeChat reinforces the emotional support provided by the company and the tangible support brought about by this activity because female migrant workers in the real world usually suffer from discrimination and marginalization in work and life, thereby lacking support and understanding. They long to be cared for and accepted in urban areas, especially in the labour market. The free one-day tour organized by the company is a manifestation of 'care', which not only makes her feel valued and accepted but also gives her a sense of belonging. This made the participant feel like a 'member' of this organization rather than just a worker. On the other hand, 'care' not only helps the interviewee alleviate negative emotions in reality but also gives her hope for the future. It strengthens her courage to persevere through difficulties and drives her to pursue a better life and career development goals.

The travel opportunities that the interviewee obtained through her own efforts not only made her proud but also won her 'envy' on her WeChat Moments. This feedback was the emotional support she had longed for. Specifically, the interviewee earned honour for herself and her family through her efforts, and this honour granted her 'face'. Compared with other rural women or female migrant workers, the interviewee seized an opportunity for WeChat marketing, worked hard to create her own value, expanded her horizons, and gained a different lifestyle from other village women. And this feedback made her feel that her efforts were rewarded and served as an affirmation of her self-worth. In accordance with social support theory, this type of emotional support made her feel understood and recognized on a psychological level, which is especially valuable for migrant women, and it was valuable for her to be able to obtain emotional support. WeChat Moments became a channel for her to receive this support, which in turn strengthened her motivation and confidence to continue to work hard. This demonstrates that her emotional support not only comes from the recognition of others but is also continuously reinforced through her presence on WeChat.

Participant 07 participated in a free day trip organized by her factory and told me about her experience.

I was excited and posted many travel photos on the moments to let friends in my hometown see how beautiful our life in the city area is. In the past, I never thought about any such trips. Taking a one-day trip with colleagues was an exciting event even though I had been living in Tianjin for a few years and working in the factory. I received dozens of 'likes'. Friends in the countryside expressed their envy.

The travel photos show beautiful natural scenery, a wide range of goods that are sold at tourist spots, and advanced methods of transportation in sharp contrast to the closed, backward, and monotonous life she had in her hometown. Unlike the participant's friends and relations in her hometown, the female migrant worker was able to see a part of the world that she would never have had the opportunity to see. The sharing of travel photos via WeChat reinforces this contrast. Online self-presentation brings her a feeling of 'glory', as it was virtually impossible for people staying in poor rural areas to have such opportunities. For a woman who comes from the underdeveloped countryside to work in the city, this

appears to be a huge achievement, and the opportunity to present her travel photos on WeChat Moments doubled her sense of pride.

After moving to urban areas to work, these women can show that they are valued in the factory and subsequently post their free day trip experiences provided by the factory on WeChat Moments. These women seem to be enjoying the joys of travel, but this is a reward for their hard work. This illustrates that these female migrant workers can choose to go to work to obtain 'equal' opportunities, but they also suffer unfair treatment or discrimination in the competitive market. In other words, to some extent, their hard work is also a reflection of the factories' exploitation of them. Their happiness showed via WeChat conceals their daily struggles. Also, these female workers were, in a way, advertising the factory and potentially driving more rural women to the cities by sharing photos via WeChat Moments of the opportunities for free tours at the factory. As [He and Wong \(2013\)](#) argued, female migrant workers in Chinese factories suffer from 'exploitation and oppression in the context of globalization and industrialism' (p. 114).

Participant 30 was working at a clothes factory, and she was also occupied with WeChat marketing after work. She said the following:

Our marketing company organised different activities online. I took part in a course about flower arranging. At the end of this course, I took a photo of myself with my work and posted this photo on the moments of the WeChat. Most of the comments through WeChat mentioned that they envied my life; people who came out to work were very different; so beautiful; the more I arranged flowers, the more beautiful I became.

The interviewee received positive feedback from people by posting photos of herself participating in a flower arrangement course on WeChat Moments. For example, she mentioned that people in the comments envied her life and praised her work's beauty. These positive appraisals hold significant emotional value for her because migrant workers may face considerable pressure in their daily work and life. Therefore, these acknowledgments made her feel that her self-worth was enhanced and increased her life satisfaction and happiness. Additionally, the interviewee built an emotional support network by sharing and interacting on Moments, and the compliments she received further boosted her sense of accomplishment. WeChat Moments has become a platform for her to gain social recognition, further supporting her spiritual and emotional growth. These positive comments and interactions are particularly impactful for rural women like her who often face social and economic marginalization. It provides a rare sense of acceptance and validation in an urban setting. Therefore, these positive comments improved her self-confidence and happiness, contributing to a sense of psychological well-being.

The interviewee participated in cultural events organized by the company and learned about areas that were once completely unknown to her. Also, she showed off her new lifestyle on her WeChat Moments. When the female migrant worker experiences various aspects of the unique culture of urban life, she can then easily share this new experience with parents and fellow villagers. Her motivation is not only to share her daily life but also to showcase a 'different' side of herself. She allows her friends to see that she is not only a worker but also an 'artistic' person. This is significant for her because, commonly, in rural areas, families may spend their leisure time playing mah-jong; watching TV comes in second place ([Huang 2011](#)). Rural women now working in urban areas can choose to participate in any activity, other than work, according to their wishes. This female migrant worker, through WeChat Moments, opens the door for many women who live in the countryside, helping them to see a different 'world'.

However, flower arranging activities organized by company managers cannot bring happiness to female migrant workers. Things are given meaning and, in the process, benefits, inequalities, or other influences can be preserved, whilst certain aspects are inten-

tionally hidden (James 2015). The company seems to offer art education for these female migrant workers so that they can gain a sense of achievement whilst enjoying these activities. Achieving such business goals through education involves, to a certain extent, the exploitation of female migrant workers. As Fisher and Gilbert emphasized, “education would increasingly be modelled on business” (Fisher and Gilbert 2013, p. 91). In fact, the activities the company provides for these female workers make them feel more indebted to the company, and this influences them to work even more diligently. In other words, the purpose of this education is to ensure that female migrant workers will make more contributions to the company.

6. Interpersonal Social Support

The second argument emphasizes the relationship between interpersonal social support and migrant women’s subjective well-being. Participant 29 and Participant 22 were occupied in conducting business over WeChat outside of their working days. They always patiently answered any questions from customers or helped solve any confusion. They believed that as long as they were familiar to the customers and trusted by them, these customers would believe that their products were the best.

The respondents used WeChat not only to help customers understand the products but also to subtly enhance their trust, which potentially promotes their WeChat business, and in turn, contributes to their subjective well-being. WeChat is a virtual environment that needs to be built on good communication. If the interviewees cannot gain the trust of the other party or form a good relationship with customers, then it is difficult for them to obtain profits from WeChat marketing. The causal logic is that trust leads to purchases, which in turn provide financial support. This is essential in business activities, especially for these female migrant workers, who have perhaps experienced unfair treatment or been deceived. WeChat communication helps buyers and sellers gain trust in each other. Thus, it is a two-way and mutually beneficial process for respondents to build harmonious relationships with others. This confirms Lambert’s (2016) argument that people acquire benefits through relationships by interacting with customers. Therefore, informal support, to some extent, promotes the development of entrepreneurship for female migrant workers through online businesses.

On the other hand, some female migrant workers, in coping with dilemmas, receive social support via WeChat. Participant 38 revealed the following:

Sometimes I was angry with the factory. When I returned, I usually talked via WeChat with my best friend, a former colleague. When I expressed myself, my heart would feel much more at ease, and I would no longer be downhearted.

When Participant 24 was in a bad mood, a few comforting words from her friends were helpful in significantly improving her mood. Participant 18 claimed that she shared ‘moments’ whenever she was frustrated and angry. Other people offered her a few words of advice, and then she would be fine and was in a better mood.

The connections established by WeChat can provide tangible aid for both parties, even though they are not in the same location. Through acquaintances or semi-acquaintances formed through businesses or other places, the use of WeChat has helped migrant workers form tacit relationships through long-term work. As a result, they can become the object of communication. Mobile phones promote social ties because they contribute to people acquiring frequent and close connections (Ling 2008), and these connections can then be used as emotional resources when needed (M. Chan 2015). It is impossible for a person to suppress their emotions completely when engaging in work, and others have various needs during work and daily life. To some extent, satisfying these emotional needs can dilute or weaken the negative emotions produced by ‘dirty’, ‘bitter’, and ‘tired’ experiences.

After all, female migrant workers who leave their hometowns will inevitably encounter difficulties in life and work. As a result, the use of WeChat helps individuals find emotional stability.

These migrant women can derive comfort from social ties, thereby obtaining support. The use of WeChat gives women the freedom to express their thoughts, especially for female migrant workers living in strange cities. Although their hearts and emotions fluctuate considerably, empowering these female migrant workers to present themselves, communicate, and interact with others in the cyber virtual space can significantly alleviate negative emotions in work and life and give female migrant workers encouragement and support. In this way, migrant women also receive respect. Therefore, women can obtain satisfaction through social support based on relationships on the WeChat.

However, according to participant 37, “you can only truly help someone if you can put yourself in their situation”. A few female migrant workers also reported that chatting with their friends on WeChat did not solve their problems or help them. For example, they mentioned that they wanted to go abroad to work due to financial difficulties, but their families opposed this decision.

Although the respondents failed to resolve their problems by chatting with others on WeChat, this does not mean that they did not desire support. As mentioned, some of the interviewees wanted to work abroad to improve their families’ economic situation, but their families opposed it. In this case, emotional support did not really help these female migrant workers solve their problems. Each person has a different living environment, set of problems, and experiences. As Yang and Brown said, when young people express themselves on social networking sites, they think about a lot of information related to themselves, such as life experience and social relationships (Yang and Brown 2016). When female migrant workers encounter negative issues, they may be reluctant to present them on WeChat. In Chinese tradition, there is a saying that ‘family ugliness should not be exaggerated’. This makes female migrant workers less willing to share their deepest sadness or difficulties. Even if some formal institutions could provide rural women with better assistance, they are unable to make better choices due to the restrictions imposed on women by traditional Chinese values. Therefore, the use of WeChat does not move some female migrant workers to open up and speak freely to gain social support.

7. Social Support from ‘Playing Around’ on WeChat

Finally, there is the argument about whether female migrant workers can acquire social support from ‘playing around’ on WeChat. Some female migrant workers, such as participant 06, participant 29, and participant 31, expressed happiness when their friends reposted the words they sent on WeChat. These words always provide readers with enlightenment and encouragement. For example participant 06 posted a message on her WeChat moment: “*even if you experienced a bad day yesterday, a new day is a new start for everybody. Try to be the person you want to be*”. She wrote this sentence not only because she wanted to give herself hope, but she also wanted to provide encouragement for her friends who came from rural areas to urban areas via WeChat Moments. The respondent received many ‘likes’, because these people liked what she said. This praise made it clear that there are still many people who share the same feelings as her.

Wherever a person may go, WeChat can form a social network. In a melting pot of well-developed information and lots of people, female migrant workers share their words of wisdom on WeChat. These words illuminate a ‘self-inspired lamp’ for the majority of female migrant workers. This lamp illuminates the thorny road of life in the city and it is an important catalyst in providing a reference for the majority of female migrant workers. In other words, the situation they have in common, of migrating and work-

ing in low-income jobs, has given them a basis for emotional communication. The use of WeChat helps individuals seek positive emotional energy and confirm their own value through social connections. Whether WeChat is used as a tool for entertainment or communication, it provides emotional and psychological support for female migrant workers with monotonous lives and also provides a convenient platform for migrant women and friends to connect and support each other. It confirms Wallis' (2018) reasoning that Chinese women receive positive emotional support based on sharing wise words through access to social media.

The use of WeChat makes the acquisition of various resources convenient and instantaneous, thereby providing social support. WeChat provides useful references and guidance for female migrant workers to work and survive. For those who have to leave their hometown, the suggestions they received through WeChat give them enlightenment, specifically on the difficulties encountered in real life. For example, they can motivate themselves to face difficulties bravely. Migrants can use this information to follow their peers, as well as understand facts and expand on their knowledge. What they have gained through the WeChat platform has made them more open-minded. At the same time, autonomous ongoing learning through 'playing around' on WeChat can potentially improve their ability to adapt to occupations and pass on positive energy from friends. It can be seen that social ties provide individuals with an internal resource that can be acquired, mobilized, and utilized (M. Chan 2015), providing social support.

Compliments, approval, and the sharing of words drive female migrant workers to feel refreshed, thereby promoting their sense of well-being. WeChat creates a space for motivation, allowing them to use it as a platform to gain useful skills or inspirational encouragement and giving them the power to improve their existing lives and seek future development. The app provides a steady stream of motivation to the new generation of female migrant workers, instilling in them a greater willingness to further develop their skills and a desire to improve themselves. It would be difficult for the desires and needs of these female migrant workers to be met if they relied only on traditional interpersonal relationships to gain knowledge and experience. The development of new media has changed this situation to a certain extent. Female migrant workers have chosen a way that they are willing to accept and experience through participating in communication practices on WeChat in their leisure time; in this way, they have gained a higher level of understanding and the pursuit of self-worth. Social media has brought vitality to the leisure lives of female migrant workers in relation to spiritual pursuits. Therefore, a finding of Botangen et al. (2018) is confirmed: social media can inspire people to communicate, practice, and learn. As a result, the use of WeChat can bring about a sense of subjective well-being for women who are dedicated to the incentives WeChat can give them to promote social support.

8. Conclusions

This study investigates the ways in which the use of social media has changed the work and lives of female migrant workers and focuses on the use of WeChat in the construction of social support and subjective well-being based on a social support perspective. I will explain the contributions of this paper to the field of theoretical perspective, methods, and research findings. The first contribution is that this study combines China's unique sociocultural background with Western social support theory to examine how female migrant workers obtain various types of support through WeChat and how these types of support affect their subjective well-being. This perspective provides a deeper understanding of how social networks function in their lives, particularly in offering emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental support, and how China's sociocultural factors shape the support they receive. In particular, digital technology, such as WeChat, not only

provides emotional support, a way of obtaining capital, and the creation of benefits, but it also helps people gain 'honour' and spread positive energy and enlightenment through social support. This confirms the value and status of social support in research on internal migrants.

Second, the innovative research methods focus on 18–37 rural women in the manufacturing industry in Tianjin to discuss social support received from companies, interpersonal communication, and 'playing around' on WeChat. The data were collected using snowball samples and face-to-face in-depth interviews methods to understand female migrant workers' happiness and WeChat usage. In the follow-up study, it is hoped that the research will have a larger age range and will take into consideration the number of years each migrant has lived in the city. Another factor could be related to whether workers are temporary or long-term employees, as this may affect the relationship between the use of WeChat and the subjective well-being of female migrant workers.

Third, the research findings show and confirm that companies, interpersonal communication, and 'playing around' on WeChat, to some extent, provide Chinese rural-urban women with social support, thereby promoting their happiness. The primary innovation reveals that companies' support plays an essential role in mental health among female migrant workers. However, social support from companies in the current studies is rare and could be addressed in subsequent research. Second, the research confirmed that interpersonal communication contributes to resilience in crisis situations (Sanchez et al. 2019). The third innovation found that migrant women 'playing around' on WeChat led to them accessing informational support, obtaining admiration from others, and findings emotional sustenance, thereby obtaining psychological pleasure. The relationship between 'playing around' on WeChat, social support, and happiness is still in its early stages, and the underlying mechanisms and deeper impacts of this also require further investigation and discussion. However, there is no denying that happiness masks the inequality, imbalance, and other issues behind this phenomenon. Nevertheless, this paper aims to offer insights and guidance on improving urban inclusion and mental health support for rural–urban migrant women.

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Note

¹ All the names of female migrant workers have been identified by a number in the following analyses for clarity and consistency.

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