



# Navigating Digital Resilience: High-Skilled International Migrants' WeChat Use During The 2022 COVID-19 Shanghai Lockdown

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**Abstract:** The enabling and constraining roles of social media in crises motivate a dynamic approach to examining digital resilience, inherent in the interplay between technological properties and enabling conditions. To expand the literature on how migrant groups navigate digital resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study uses the concept of affordances as an analytical lens to examine how high-skilled international migrants in China used WeChat during the 2022 Shanghai lockdown. Through semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024, the study has identified three resilience capabilities enacted by participants to cope with the disruption: tactical negotiations of (in)visibility, active seeking for reliable information, and building localised communities through engaging with WeChat's affordances, namely visibility, searchability, and association. This process reveals affordances as interactional and flexible, dependent on users' agency in adaptation to real-life challenges. Emphasising the intercultural contexts, we understand digital resilience as intercultural learning and adaptation, negotiated across sociocultural environments and digital infrastructure. The findings call for fostering inclusive digital and intercultural conditions to enable more effective resilience responses to future crises.

**Keywords:** Social Media Affordances, Digital Resilience, WeChat, High-Skilled International Migrants, COVID-19 Lockdown

## 1. Introduction

As a complex and context-sensitive construct, resilience is the capacity for positive functioning, achieved through a process that enables successful adaptation to adversity (Southwick et al., 2014). Regarding how individuals and communities (Gyan et al., 2023; Norris et al., 2008) adapt positively to life disturbances, resilience studies highlight the interaction of personal, social, and environmental factors. Technological developments have sparked considerable scholarly interest in the potential of digital media to promote resilience. Digital resilience broadly refers to the skills developed through engagement with digital technologies to withstand and adapt to disruptions and “transform to a new stable state” (Boh et al., 2023, p. 344). Among these technologies, social media platforms offer various opportunities for action, often referred to as affordances. Emerging research has identified several social media affordances, including visibility (the ability for content and users to be seen), searchability (the ability to locate or retrieve information), and association (the capacity to form or maintain connections), as especially relevant for understanding how users navigate crisis situations. Highlighting these in the discussion emphasizes our analytical focus: exploring the relationship between these affordances and users' agency in building resilience. Amid the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, social media acted as a positive tool to build resilience, primarily through participatory storytelling, emotional regulation, social networking, and informational support (Hou, 2025; Peng et al., 2024; Xie et al., 2022) while its constraints were identified, particularly for migrants regrading heightened anxiety, misinformation, and intensified surveillance (e.g., Goldsmith et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2023). As the world transitions into the post-COVID era, it is more valuable to reflect on and further identify the (in)efficient use of social media to develop better coping strategies for future crises.

Social media use varies across distinct stages of the pandemic (Nguyen et al., 2020) and migratory trajectories. Existing studies on migrants' social media use during crises were largely centred on the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic or on vulnerable groups (e.g., Goldsmith et al., 2022). Moving beyond exploring the platform's functionalities to demonstrate social media user behaviour during COVID (You et al., 2023), social media affordances offer significant insights into understanding the dynamic interplays between users, technology, and social-cultural contexts. This lens emphasises the relational and “the perceived actual or imagined properties” of social media (Ronzhyn et al., 2023, p. 3178), enabled by specified contextual conditions. To expand the literature on how social media as resources are enacted for crisis coping, this study explores the use of social media by highly skilled international professionals during the later phases of pandemic-induced city lockdowns. This focus is significant for further understanding of how digital resilience can be built and developed among distinct migrant groups, given that high-skilled professionals' material conditions (e.g., socioeconomic status, media literacy, intercultural experiences) may differ from those of other migrant groups (e.g., low-skilled workers and international students) facing the pandemic.

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Specifically, this study addresses a gap in digital resilience research by examining how affordance-based analysis of WeChat use among high-skilled international migrants in a non-Western, post-2022 lockdown context reveals new dynamics of resilience practices beyond previously studied periods and populations. By explicitly applying an affordance lens, this work advances post-pandemic migration studies by enlightening how context-specific, agentic use of platform affordances enables nuanced and adaptive forms of digital resilience among skilled migrant populations in China.

China was one of the countries hardest hit by COVID-19 in 2020. Among more than 840,000 foreign residents in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021), many international migrants experienced traumatic experiences through struggling with various challenges, including language barriers, mental health, and business bankruptcy (Kefala & Lan, 2022; Zou et al., 2023) due to China's Zero-COVID policy. As China's primary global financial hub, Shanghai attracts a high concentration of highly skilled international professionals due to its cosmopolitan environment, talent-recruitment policies, and strategic urban development. The city lockdown from April 1st to June 2022, with strict quarantine measures (e.g., stay-at-home demands, mass testing), provided a unique context for this study. The findings have contributed to three main research themes: 1) identifying WeChat affordances enacted in resilience building; 2) enriching understanding of how technological and sociocultural conditions shape digital resilience among skilled international migrants; 3) framing digital resilience as intercultural learning and adaptation for achieving stronger resilient capabilities across cultures.

## 2. Literature Review

Among migrant groups, social media platforms have become essential for decision-making, cultural adaptation, job-seeking, and community building, providing emotional, social, and informational support (e.g., Aldamen, 2025; Croucher & Rahmani, 2015; Ju et al., 2019). The COVID-19 quarantine and lockdown led individuals to spend significantly more time on social media to access social connections, stay informed about pandemic-related updates, and regulate emotions when physically apart from others (e.g., Hiramts et al., 2021; Peng et al., 2024). Meanwhile, misinformation and social comparison through social media have adversely affected their physical and mental health (e.g., causing sleeplessness, stress, and anxiety) (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Yue et al., 2022). The social media practices enacted during crises indicate a context-specific approach to understanding their use, particularly among migrant groups who are often disproportionately affected.

### 2.1. Digital Resilience And Migrants' Ambivalent Social Media Use

Boh et al. (2023, p. 349)'s integrated framework for digital resilience research demonstrates that resilience capabilities (absorb, adapt, transform) are realised through interactions between digital technology features (e.g., intelligent sensing, scalability) and enabling conditions (e.g., organisational restructuring, adaptive culture). Alongside individual coping, building resilience requires ecosystem-level strategies and collective action from communities, national governments, and international organisations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media facilitated participatory storytelling and emotion regulation (Hou, 2025; Peng et al., 2024), enabling connectivity and solidarity to build community resilience, that is, the collective capacity to withstand, adapt to, and recover from adversity (Norris et al., 2008). Digital platform resilience studies (e.g., Yan et al., 2026) predominantly highlight the enabling roles of digital technologies, but the constraints arising from their use should also be noted.

Migrants' social media use in crises is a dynamic process of (dis)empowerment, shaped by the interplay among their agency, structural constraints, and platform features (e.g., Ju et al., 2023), and it varies across distinct migration experiences (Massey, 2005). For migrant and ethnic minority populations, social media platforms were an important source of COVID-19 information, but they may encounter difficulty accessing information in their native languages or from trusted sources (Goldsmith et al., 2022). Empirical evidence also suggests that social media use offers informational and emotional support to maladjusted international students during a crisis, but it also risks exacerbating poor psychosocial well-being through negative social comparisons and mindless browsing (Chen et al., 2022).

To better understand how migrants navigate digital resilience in crisis, the ambivalent roles of social media underscore the necessity for a dynamic, multi-layered approach rather than a monolithic, fixed one. Consequently, this study not only examines how resilient capabilities are enacted through favourable social media use but also discusses the constraints on leveraging it, particularly how platform affordances and users' intercultural contexts can shape potential challenges.

### 2.2. Understanding Social Media Affordances

Originating from understanding affordances as the possibilities for action that an object offers to an actor (Gibson, 1986), technologies are interpreted as "shaped by and shaping the practices", interacting with human agencies (Hutchby, 2001, p. 444). Scholars have analysed social media affordances from two levels: a low-level, feature-oriented approach focused on concrete platform mechanics, and a high-level, abstract approach examining broader relational practices and patterns enabled by the platform (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). By emphasising the commonality, the affordances of social networking sites are identified as replicability (e.g., content can be duplicated and reposted), searchability (e.g., finding and retrieving information), and scalability (from the intended audience to a massive public) when examining technology-human interactions (Boyd, 2010). And the commonly recognised social media affordances are visibility (e.g., seen or observed by others within the network), editability (e.g., ability to revise content before posting), persistence (e.g., enduring nature of posts and conversations as archives), and association (e.g., making social connections) (Ronzhy et al., 2023).

The low-level framework for analysing social media affordances emphasises their relational, perceptual, and contextual attributes, allowing the examination of platform-specific affordances, such as those of Facebook or WeChat. Moreover, these affordances are open to change, impacted by users' agency and social-cultural norms. Thus, users often creatively and strategically use social media affordances to construct collective identities, shared narratives, and emotions (Lüders et al., 2022). Identified as fluid, social media affordances arising from daily media practices evolve under various conditions (Peng et al., 2024) and for diverse migrant groups. The imagined affordances (e.g., visibility and sociality) enable female refugees in Germany to manage their online presence and feel connected despite real-life isolation (Witteborn, 2018). For women migrant workers, social media affordances are identified as gendered, reflected in their job-market access, connections with family and friends, and emotional reliance (Hurley & Johnston, 2023).

Though a wide range of social media affordances and features emerge among migrant communities, scholarly attention has disproportionately focused on vulnerable groups. Other migrant groups, including high-skilled international migrants and expatriates with distinct resources (e.g., education and digital literacy), remain under-researched. Additionally, most studies focus on Western social media platforms (e.g., Facebook), with little attention to how crises shape the affordances of social media in non-Western receiving contexts. This study synthesises low- and high-levels of social media affordances and investigates how international professionals agentively enact them to build resilient capabilities.

### 2.3. WeChat Affordances And Its Use During COVID-19

WeChat (微信, *Weixin* in Chinese), launched in 2011 by Tencent, has evolved into a digital ecosystem encompassing a range of features (e.g., Group Chats, Moments, Official Accounts). Research on WeChat (e.g., Cao et al., 2024; Ju et al., 2019; Plantin & de Seta, 2019) has examined its technological design, infrastructure, and use across various scenarios, including cultural adaptation, language learning, and mental well-being. Focusing on its affordances and specific uses, four WeChat affordances (association, dyadic interaction, broadcasting, and reviewability) were identified as shaping bridging and bonding social capital, which differentially influence users' psychological well-being (Zhang & Jung, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, WeChat has emerged as one of the most popular social media platforms for accessing news and information among migrants and ethnic minority groups (Goldsmith et al., 2022). It has also served as a crucial link for Chinese communities globally, facilitating information exchange, medical support, and diaspora governance (Ceccagno & Thunø, 2023; Negro & Hu, 2022).

Notably, the crisis reshaped the use of technology, embedding new meanings in social media platforms. COVID-19 quarantine measures influenced consumer behaviour and enhanced online shopping via WeChat chat groups (You et al., 2023). The Chinese government used WeChat as a health surveillance tool, making users permanently visible through embedding the colour-coded health code system (Liang, 2020). However, WeChat's role in the COVID-19 pandemic among high-skilled international professionals is underexplored. As they may have distinct access to and use of social media, this study explores how highly skilled international migrants in China used WeChat to build resilience by answering the following two research questions:

**RQ1:** *What were the potentials and constraints of WeChat perceived by highly skilled international professionals in Shanghai during the COVID-19 lockdown?*

**RQ2:** *How did these professionals enact WeChat's affordances to build digital resilience during the lockdown?*

## 3. Methodology

The qualitative study was adopted to examine how international professionals in China used social media to build resilience during the COVID-19 city lockdowns, with a focus on their WeChat practices. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their lived experiences in a focused yet flexible manner (Kallio et al., 2016). Upon obtaining ethical approval from the School Ethics Committee, participants were recruited via convenience sampling from the authors' network between May and October 2024. To mitigate potential risks to participants' well-being when recalling the lockdown, they were fully informed of the research project and their right to withdraw. While a two-year lag between the 2022 Shanghai lockdown and the 2024 interviews posed challenges for recall accuracy, this retrospective interval (Sandelowski, 1999) also offered distinct advantages. In particular, it afforded participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences with greater emotional clarity and perspective, facilitating deeper sense-making about the significance of digital resilience during the crisis. This temporal distance helped participants identify lasting impacts, reshape practices, and draw critical lessons from their reliance on WeChat, thus enriching the data with more mature and considered insights into the resilience process.

### 3.1. Participants

Participants in this study were defined as high-skilled migrant professionals, distinguished from refugees or low-skilled labour migrants, with the following recruitment criteria: 1) international employees hold working visas, having a tertiary or equivalent educational degree, good career backgrounds and wages; 2) have lived in Shanghai for at least one year before the city lockdown; 3) experienced the 2022 Shanghai COVID-19 lockdown, having good memories their lived experiences and willing to talk about it; 4) used WeChat in daily life and had full access to WeChat features. For sampling strategies, this study was more aligned with information power (Malterud et al., 2016), emphasising the decisive role of "the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study" (p. 1759) in determining the number of participants required, rather than adopting data saturation as a primary criterion. To mitigate recall bias (Coughlin, 1990) in semi-structured interviews, participants with high motivation to share their lived experiences were recruited.

Consequently, nine participants (see Table 1) were involved in this study, comprising seven females and two males, with working and living experience in Shanghai ranging from one to eight years. They were mainly aged 20-40 and came from countries such as Spain, Germany, the UK, and the USA. Prior to the lockdown, participants used WeChat chat groups, such as the "foreigners in Shanghai" to build professional connections and friendships in China. During the lockdown, community groups became essential for mandatory health reporting. Their language use on WeChat was context-dependent, with English as the common language (all participants spoke English) and Mandarin used variably depending on participants' proficiency (most were at a basic level) and recipients' preferences.

**Table 1:** The demographic information of nine participants

No.	Nationality	Gender	Age	Year starting to live in Shanghai	Occupation	Mandarin level	WeChat use prior to lockdown (Y/N)
1	UK	Female	20-30	2019	Teacher	Basic	Yes
2	UK	Female	20-30	2018	Teacher	Basic	Yes
3	Spain	Female	20-30	2018	Project manager	Basic	Yes
4	USA	Male	20-30	2019	Teacher	Basic	Yes
5	Poland	Female	20-30	2014	Project manager	Basic	Yes
6	Germany	Male	31-40	2014	Translator	Proficiency	Yes

No.	Nationality	Gender	Age	Year starting to live in Shanghai	Occupation	Mandarin level	WeChat use prior to lockdown (Y/N)
7	Spain	Female	31-40	2015	Translator	Proficiency	Yes
8	Thailand	Female	31-40	2021	Translator	Basic	Yes
9	Italy	Female	41-50	2015	PR officer	Basic	Yes

Source: by the author

### 3.2. Data Collection And Analysis

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Zoom in English because participants currently resided in different regions, making online interviewing a more practical option than in-person. To protect privacy, the Zoom “waiting room” feature ensured that only the intended participants could join. A researcher-developed interview protocol of 15 questions about participants’ daily use of WeChat during the lockdown was piloted in April 2024 to ensure validity and clarity (Gudmundsdottir & Brock-Utne, 2010), resulting in adjustments to the wording and structure of interview questions to improve comprehension. Online interviews lasted about 40 minutes on average, with follow-up questions for clarification. Since the interviews were conducted two years after the lockdown, participants were encouraged to describe WeChat use in specified activities by providing examples, and cross-references in the data analysis were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the shared information.

The auto-generated transcripts were reviewed and edited for accuracy for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), aided by NVivo 12. The authors independently and repeatedly read the transcripts to identify recurring themes. Initial codes related to WeChat use by international employees were generated and refined to ensure clarity and precision until a consensus was reached. Memos and annotations were used to capture potential themes and key ideas. Reflexivity was maintained throughout data analysis by discussing the possible influence of researcher backgrounds on theme identification and interpretation. Accordingly, eight sub-theme categories were (re)grouped into three key types of social media affordances, including visibility, searchability, and association (see Table 2). These affordances were further incorporated into users’ three resilient capabilities to better understand how highly skilled international migrants in China used WeChat during the COVID lockdown.

**Table 2:** Emergent themes and sub-themes of capabilities and WeChat use in the lockdown

Main themes (Capabilities developed)	Sub-themes (Potential and constraints of WeChat use)	
Tactical negotiation of (in)visibility	<i>Affordances enacted</i>	1) <i>Personal needs and views</i> Group buy(e.g. food and drinks), information exchange (with the help of translation), personal contacts, announcements
	Visibility: what to be seen	2) Online censorship (e.g. criticising posts and videos), inaccessibility to group-buy via Mini-programs and rules due to language barrier (Chinese as a foreign language) and some online groups
Active seeking for reliable lockdown information	Searchability: how to access information	3) <i>Multiple sources</i> Community chat groups, Mini-programs, official news, first-hand information, local news, 4) <i>Information checking and sharing</i> Rumours, pictures and videos on quarantine centres 5) <i>Use other apps</i> WhatsApp, Weibo, Instagram, YouTube
Building localised communities	Association: who and how to be connected with	6) <i>Making new friends</i> Get closer to local Chinese, occasionally temporary 7) <i>Communal building</i> Network with foreigners for attitudes towards lockdown (e.g. zero-covid, lockdown measures) 8) <i>Family at home</i>

Source: by the author

## 4. Results

At the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants sought help from contacts outside China regarding issues such as mask shortages and travel restrictions (Moffa & Di Gregorio, 2023). As the pandemic progressed, particularly during the lockdown, they shifted focus to local resources, utilising WeChat to access information about neighbourhood closures and quarantine facilities. Participants’ daily WeChat use during the lockdown fostered three capabilities: 1) tactical negotiations of (in)visibility; 2) proactive seeking for reliable lockdown information; and 3) building localised communities for support.

### 4.1. Tactical Negotiations of (In)Visibility

Participants reflected that visibility was enacted when they wanted their messages or posts to be seen by actual or imagined audiences, and when they also wanted to see other users’ messages and posts in Group chats and Moments (like Facebook posts). During the lockdown, WeChat groups, only visible to group members (Zhang & Quan-Haase, 2022), were the main channel for ordering food, with people participating in group buys because all other grocery apps were overloaded. Usually, tens of kilograms and large-scale participation (Hu et al., 2022) are required for a successful final purchase. However, some reported that being involved in group buys was too complex due to their unfamiliarity with the bulk-buy procedure and lack of local knowledge. Sometimes, they browsed other users’ WeChat Moments to see if the goods met their special needs.

*“I used some of the WeChat contacts I was able to find, which were kind of like the black market there, because they were just people who had purchased a bunch of vegetables and stuff and were selling it by posting the food stocks on the Moments.” (P8)*

It was also common to exchange food with neighbours by posting in group chats what they needed and what they had available. WeChat groups also served as the fastest and most convenient way to stay informed, as Shanghai residents were required to participate in mass testing organised by their communities, with schedules often changing at the last minute.

Despite the convenience of accessing life essentials through WeChat group chats and Moments, such information might be inaccessible to some relatively new participants or those with language barriers, and they had to translate words and/or images in the conversations/posts. In terms of technological platform design (Gaver, 1991), some participants perceived this as a limitation of WeChat during the pandemic: its built-in translation service, which only works for text messages, did not apply to Mini-Programs. The difficulties in translating information from overloaded WeChat group messages were also noted.

Participants report another constraint on WeChat use due to online censorship in China. Posts criticising the situations in Shanghai, uploaded to WeChat Subscription Accounts, were often deleted or banned shortly after publication (Zhang, 2023). Occasionally, participants' dissenting comments or views about the lockdown could not be posted on WeChat when flagged as sensitive. Tencent, WeChat's parent company, maintains platform governance through content moderation policies that align with Chinese regulations and community guidelines, including keyword filtering, algorithmic scanning, and user reporting mechanisms. This system shapes the online environment by placing clear boundaries on user expression and dynamically shifting which topics are permissible; it therefore creates the invisibility (Treem & Leonardi, 2013), which occurs when it is difficult for users to make their voices heard or for their presence to be seen. When some COVID-related keywords were under surveillance on WeChat (Ruan et al., 2020), participants resorted to Instagram or YouTube for updated COVID information and self-expression or used another language rather than Mandarin when posting on WeChat. For instance, one participant used the English word "sheep" as a homophonic workaround to evade COVID-related keyword monitoring.

*"If there were something I did not want others (relevant to online censorship) to know about, then I would probably use English or acronyms to not get blocked directly at least. I also used the word 'sheep' to stand for the positive COVID-19 test result because they have the same pronunciation in Chinese." (P6)*

But some participants living in Shanghai for several years expressed their understanding of this situation, saying:

*"You are in a country. You need to respect the rules of the country. If they (videos) are removed, there is a reason for which they are removed. Maybe there was something that was not perfect. I'm okay with that." (P9)*

Participants' differing perceptions of WeChat's (in)visibility exemplified the flexibility and fluidity of social media affordances, which varied with users' motivations, length of residence, and how information was shared. This shift from using visibility as a means of connecting with others to an experience of imposed observation demonstrates how the same affordance can help or hinder resilience, depending on the situation. In terms of digital resilience, WeChat's visibility facilitated access to information, enabling group purchases, food exchanges, and updates on local conditions during the lockdown. However, these sources could remain inaccessible due to newcomers' unfamiliarity with local groups, language barriers, or online censorship. In addition, participants' strategic responses to (in)visibility changed into a state of imposed, permanent visibility when the government customised WeChat as a public health surveillance tool to monitor their mobility and health status (Liang, 2020).

#### 4.2. Active Seeking of Reliable Information

Social media platforms allow users to search and select which information to consume (Mukerjee & Yang, 2021) and which platform to use (Peng et al., 2024). Different from previous research that identified WeChat (e.g., its Official Accounts, Moments, and Group Chats) as one of the primary sources of rumours about prevention methods during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pu et al., 2021), participants in this study overall reported that WeChat was a useful tool for accessing and collecting lockdown-related information. By enacting searchability, participants reported several specific micro-practices, including browsing group chat message histories, searching via keywords within chat groups, navigating through contact lists to reach specific individuals for targeted inquiries, and scanning Moments for updates relevant to their residential area. These varied approaches allowed them to filter for trustworthy content on WeChat to stay informed about their lockdown conditions and take action accordingly. Some participants who used multiple social media platforms reported that WeChat chat groups provided trustworthy lockdown updates much faster than on other Chinese social media, such as Weibo (similar to Twitter/X).

Participants actively sought "true" information about local and personal circumstances through WeChat, such as what would happen to them if they tested positive. The community chat groups were evaluated as essential for obtaining accurate information and staying informed about their conditions. Even when news was not officially published, it was considered trustworthy based on the discussion in chat groups.

*"On the community group, there was a picture of our door of just this building taped over with police tape. And considering there were only ten apartments in this tiny building, we were discussing why our building was just taped over. Then it was confirmed in the chat that someone had COVID in the building". (P1)*

Some participants subscribed to official public accounts on WeChat, such as the *Shanghai Municipal Commission of Health*, to monitor the latest situation, including the number of affected cases, which enabled them to comply with the required measures. They regarded WeChat as a trustworthy and efficient channel for updated lockdown information. By contrast, some believed that official reports tended to obscure the actual situation and preferred to seek information on WeChat Mini-Programs, which were developed to provide timely COVID-19 updates and helped them make informed decisions about how to cope with the current circumstances.

The analysis found that while WeChat served as a crucial news source for migrants during the pandemic, accessing COVID-19 information in their native languages or through trusted channels remained challenging, aligning with the study of Goldsmith et al. (2022). Assisted by WeChat's built-in machine translation (MT), participants saved much time and effort in understanding discussions among local Chinese residents and communicating with them. However, when participants were unfamiliar with the MT feature or encountered untranslated Moments posts, images, or reports from Mini-Programs, they had

to use other translation applications. Then they pasted the translated Mandarin text to communicate within local Chinese online communities.

Managing misinformation and rumours was another significant challenge highlighted by participants. When confronted with information whose accuracy they doubted, participants described a range of coping tactics. They often cross-checked questionable updates by consulting multiple sources, including other WeChat chat groups, official accounts, and external platforms such as Weibo or international news outlets. Community discussions within chat groups played an important role, as participants would ask directly for confirmation or seek consensus among group members before acting on or sharing uncertain news. One participant reflected on this process with the following account: *“At some point, someone posted that our building would be locked down for another week, but nobody could find an official notice. I posted in another group for foreigners, and several people replied with screenshots from official sources, so we only believed it when we saw the same message from different trustworthy people.”* (P1) This approach to information verification not only helped reduce anxiety caused by misleading rumours but also fostered a collective sense of responsibility within migrant and local communities. Generally speaking, participants relied on WeChat, particularly community chat groups, for trusted and real-time access to local news and quarantine information. They also actively searched for and selected various WeChat services to filter and verify information, which distinguishes them from labour migrants who lack information literacy when assessing multiple COVID-19 sources (Ju et al., 2023).

#### 4.3. Building Localised Communities

The affordances of social media allow users to create and join networks, participate in discussions, and share content with ease (Khan et al., 2019). This type of social media affordance extends beyond an individual’s offline social network (Darling-Wolf, 2021), and this connection becomes more significant during the COVID-19 pandemic, when physical connections are cut off (Peng et al., 2024). In our study, participants used WeChat to build connections with previously unknown neighbours and maintained contact with close friends who shared similar perspectives and experiences regarding the crisis. Established virtual communities enable participants with shared interests to connect, collaborate, and support one another, to survive the lockdown and strict quarantine. Some participants reflected that had it not been for the pandemic and the community groups, they might never have had the chance to get to know each other.

*“This lockdown has made me realise how we before just lived our lives without knowing who lives next door or not knowing the faces of all people around you”.* (P3)

Through establishing connections with their Chinese neighbourhoods and local communities, participants, as foreigners, gained a better understanding of the current circumstances in the host country and realised that they belonged to a community that had previously been overlooked. This connectivity contrasts with the loss and victimhood reported by young Westerners who left China involuntarily during the COVID pandemic (Kefala & Lan, 2022). Often, this assistance was spontaneous and unsolicited, fostering a sense of goodwill and warmth within the community.

*“There’s one of the group leaders who noticed I was struggling and he just added me as a friend and he started speaking to me in English and told me this is the next thing and so on it’s just like the acts of kindness from people who I would have never talked to otherwise.”* (P4)

Association was also reflected in conversations with like-minded friends who were not from China. This so-called foreigner community differs from neighbourhoods built with local Chinese, whose inquiries primarily concerned food and community conditions. Participants often discussed and compared their lockdown status within groups and reached a consensus on China’s COVID-19 policy. These observed practices were consistent with the mutual enhancement (Khan et al., 2019), a process in which the validation of information within a social group co-constructs and solidifies shared viewpoints. This group created an online space for sharing internal feelings and engaging in collective celebrations, fostering a sense of togetherness. As one participant recalled on their group video call,

*“So during the lockdown, instead of meeting outside because it was not possible, we had a birthday party online. We used to meet there, prepare drinks, and celebrate friendship through WeChat, which is something that we didn’t do before”* (P9).

Regarding association during the lockdown, WeChat enabled international migrants to break free from existing social circles and build relationships with local Chinese and non-local friends to address real-life issues. The newly established connectivity is geographically and community-based. Their connections were often bound to individuals residing in a specific geographical area and somewhat obligatory as participants relied on local groups for essential information. Highlighting the role of community support, one participant recounted a positive experience with neighbours:

*“The lockdown really was subjective to different people based on their community and the resources they could get. What the community managed to do really influenced how we felt at that time”.* (P1)

Occasionally, this connectivity was often temporary (Peng et al., 2024) and subject to change, with bonds weakening once the external pressures subsided. Some participants felt that their community chat groups have become burdensome, filled with irrelevant messages, complaints, and advertisements rather than providing helpful information.

## 5. Discussion

This study demonstrates how skilled international professionals developed their resilient capabilities through WeChat to cope with strict quarantine measures during the Shanghai lockdown. As social media affordances are context-dependent (Sun & Suthers, 2023), COVID-19 enriches our understandings of their relationality and flexibility. Furthermore, interpreting (digital) resilience as dynamic changes (“bounce forward”) that transform into a new stable state, rather than the static sameness of the original situation (“bounce back”) (Boh et al., 2023; Southwick et al., 2014), motivates us to explore how digital resilience could be developed within intercultural contexts.

### 5.1. Interactional Social Media Affordances In Resilience Building

During the lockdown, three salient WeChat affordances, visibility, searchability, and association, worked together to enable participants' online voicing, access to reliable COVID information, and local connections. However, these affordances did not function uniformly across different levels of resilience; rather, they supported both individual ("I coped") and community ("we coped") forms of adaptation, sometimes in overlapping ways. Visibility and searchability frequently enabled individual resilience, such as a participant using Moments to seek or share resources for personal coping, or employing search within chat groups to retrieve information necessary for individual decision-making. In contrast, association was especially pivotal for community resilience, as group chats and collective verification of information enabled coordination of support, the sharing of responsibilities, and the cultivation of a sense of solidarity. At times, these affordances intersected; for example, the visibility of contributions within community groups empowered both the individual posting and the wider group responding.

Their interplays accentuate the relational attributes of social media affordances. As Ronzhyn et al. (2023) illustrate, typologies of affordances can be understood through their associated relationships; for instance, searchability, a lower-level affordance, can be a component of visibility. Though our study does not aim to develop a taxonomy of affordances, the findings reveal the interactive nature of WeChat's affordances in fostering resilience capabilities, particularly for shaping community resilience. To ensure timely access to reliable information for prompt action, the association (for example, via chat groups) supports the formation of group-oriented, local community-based connections, serving as an effective space for international migrants to publish, retrieve, and assess lockdown and quarantine information through interpersonal connections (Wang et al., 2023). In this case, cross-verification helps mitigate the risk of being misled by unofficial sources (Li et al., 2022). Compared with low-skilled migrant workers' WeChat use during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ju et al., 2023), high-skilled international professionals in our study transform their daily WeChat use for bonding and maintaining social networks into forging latent ties with strangers, which further develop into a communal space for informational, emotional, and social togetherness.

The study also indicates constraints on WeChat-facilitated resilience-building, including online censorship, misinformation, and the temporality of crisis-formed groups, consistent with the paradoxical roles of social media in crises. However, this clear-cut dichotomy does not effectively demonstrate digital resilience as a multi-actor ecosystem (Boh et al., 2023), in which individuals, groups, and organisations may enact divergent yet interdependent responses to disruptions. As identified, WeChat's visibility for participants to enable help-seeking was transformed into mandatory, permanent visibility when WeChat was repurposed for government surveillance (Liang, 2020). Given that digital resilience is a collaborative, stakeholder-driven practice within specific contexts, the affordances or properties of social media in resilience building should be understood as contingent, interactional, and systemic, accounting for how they emerge from the socio-technical interactions among users, platforms, and institutions, across broader social and environmental scales (Yan et al., 2026). These findings also invite comparative reflection: for example, platforms such as WhatsApp or Telegram may afford greater privacy or different moderation dynamics, potentially altering how migrant communities strategise visibility, association, and information verification. Future cross-platform investigations could further illuminate how varying affordances shape digital resilience across diverse social and technological environments.

### 5.2. Digital Resilience As Intercultural Adaptation

The theoretical framework of digital resilience (Boh et al., 2023) has emphasised its contextual nature, arguing for the significance of both internal digital technology characteristics and enabling conditions, in line with a broader social-ecological approach to examining digital platform resilience (Yan et al., 2026). Yet its cross-cultural manifestations and dynamics remain underexplored. Our findings on WeChat use among international migrants and their resilience capabilities offer a case for understanding digital resilience in intercultural contexts.

In our study, participants relied on WeChat, a widely used app in their host environment, to engage with Chinese communities and stay up to date on lockdown conditions. This digitally mediated space supported international migrants' adaptation to lockdown challenges and facilitated intercultural connections and cultural learning (Nam et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the established digital resilience also introduced new challenges for international professionals, including language barriers (Zou et al., 2023), unfamiliarity with Chinese values, and online censorship. WeChat, as infrastructure, is a state-aligned platform of the Chinese model, markedly shaped by techno-nationalist media regulations and a cyber-sovereignty agenda (Plantin & de Seta, 2019). WeChat's design embeds Chinese cultural norms, such as guanxi and group-oriented features (Sun & Suthers, 2023). And its technological limitations, such as the lack of a built-in translation function in Mini Programs (in 2020), made it difficult for international users to use.

In the face of these difficulties, high-skilled international professionals' social media literacy (Cho et al., 2024) served as a critical coping resource. Grounded in an understanding of reality and media, and in the analytical ability to evaluate information, social media literacy supported them to adopt proactive, agential practices for navigating the lockdown and the infodemic. In 2023, WeChat's enhanced translation service, available in chat, images, Moments, and Mini-Programs (Tencent News, 2023), demonstrated the platform's language adaptability, better meeting international users' needs (Karahanna et al., 2018), and could more effectively support migrants navigate a new cultural environment or adapt to crises. Under China's strict quarantine, participants sometimes held differing views and adopted varied digital resilience tactics, most vividly in how they searched for and filtered COVID-19 information. These distinctions further evidence that social media usage patterns and habits vary across sociocultural environments (Yue et al., 2022) and also depend on users' individualised knowledge and competence during the resilient process.

Focusing on WeChat's role in crisis adaptation, it is not merely a tool for digital resilience, but an active constituent of intercultural adaptation itself, shaped by the resilient capabilities and constraints it affords international users. To further support this interpretation, we can draw on Kim's (2001) stress-adaptation-growth framework of intercultural learning, which views intercultural adaptation as a cyclic process in which individuals encounter stressful cultural challenges, employ adaptive resources and communication strategies, and ultimately experience personal growth. Within this framework, WeChat's affordances function as digital resources that international migrants leverage to manage the stress of the lockdown context, actively adapt to Chinese sociocultural and technological environments, and foster growth in intercultural competence and resilience. Specifically, visibility, searchability, and association on WeChat enhance users' ability to manage uncertainty,

negotiate access to cultural resources, and build new social bonds, thereby facilitating the stress-adaptation-growth cycle articulated by Kim. Though both digital technologies and sociocultural environments pose challenges to international migrants' daily lives under lockdown, their agency and the affordances of WeChat are crucial for cultivating resilience at both the individual and community levels. Building on Kim's theory, we argue that digital resilience constitutes a process of intercultural learning and adaptation, negotiated across sociocultural environments and digital infrastructure during crises.

## 6. Conclusion

Incorporating social media affordances and digital resilience, the study has identified three resilience capabilities developed by high-skilled international professionals in China to cope with the 2022 Shanghai lockdown: tactical negotiations of (in)visibility, active seeking of reliable information, and building localised communities by engaging with WeChat's visibility, searchability, and association. These actualised properties demonstrate that social media affordances are not monolithic or fixed but fundamentally interactional, enacted through users' agency in adaptation to real-life challenges. Focusing on digital resilience within an intercultural context, it is understood as a process of intercultural learning and adaptation, shaped by the ongoing negotiations of sociocultural environments and digital infrastructure. The findings call for fostering inclusive digital and intercultural environments to enable more effective resilience responses to future crises. Importantly, these insights can inform municipal authorities and policymakers in designing digital public services that are accessible across languages and responsive to the evolving needs of diverse migrant communities during emergencies, strengthening more equitable crisis communication and support.

## 7. Limitations And Future Research

One major limitation of this study is the small number of participants ultimately recruited to recall their lockdown experiences, which may limit generalisability to other migrant communities and obscure heterogeneity within international migrant populations (e.g., gender and age). To address these issues in future research, it is recommended to implement a snowball sampling strategy that begins with a diverse set of initial contacts and motivates them to refer individuals across various backgrounds. This approach can better capture underrepresented groups and increase the overall sample size, thereby enhancing representativeness. While this study's focus on WeChat extends literature on digital resilience and social media affordances, it overlooks international migrants' broader cross-platform engagement and other enabling conditions of resilience, such as institutional and policy support. Future research can adopt comparative and polymedia approaches to better understand how digital resilience is developed across diverse digital media platforms and migrant groups. Additionally, building on the framing of social media as a language-learning environment and an intercultural space (Barrot, 2022), studies could further examine digital resilience and technological design from a multicultural perspective.

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