Migrant Chinese women's online social support in the UK and its impact on their postnatal mental wellbeing

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Background

Childbirth is an important life event in a woman's life. Experiencing emotional problems is a common situation that many women have to deal with after giving birth. Social support has been shown to be an effective factor in improving women's postnatal mental wellbeing (Zhang and Jin 2016; Chen *et al.* 2019). Medical sociologists unpack social support as informational support, emotional support, and tangible support (Lin *et al.* 1999). People's social relationships are the main source of their social support. Migrants are therefore at a significant disadvantage compared to the local population in terms of access to social support because they usually have fewer social relationships than the local population in host countries (Chu 2005; Li *et al.* 2021; Goyal *et al.* 2022). As a result, seeking social support from digital spaces is a supplementary way for migrant mothers to obtain social support. Chinese migrants in the UK, one of the major growing groups of migrants, have received disproportionately less research attention. Therefore, there is a need for more research on migrant Chinese women's postnatal social support to improve the UK's understanding of this group in terms of their experience of seeking social support. This project sets out to understand migrant Chinese women's experience of developing peer relationships to obtain social support in digital spaces and how the social support affects their postnatal mental wellbeing.

Aims & research objectives

This project aims to explore UK migrant Chinese women's experiences and perceptions of accessing social support and building peer relationships in private digital spaces during the perinatal period.

WeChat groups, a popular instant message app that is popular within the Chinese community, similar to WhatsApp groups, are used as an example of private digital spaces. The project will help to explore the specific research objectives:

1. To understand the typologies of social support that are provided in WeChat groups for migrant Chinese mothers.

2. To understand the determinants of supportive peer relationships for migrant Chinese mothers during their postnatal period.

3. To understand what makes migrant Chinese mothers use or not use WeChat groups as a source of online social support.

Methods

This research was conducted over two stages. In the first stage, 20 participants were recruited through social media, charity networks, and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants. Sociogram was used as a tool to stimulate conversations with participants during the interviews. Sociogram is a useful tool to visualise people's social networks. It illustrates the closeness of each relationship by asking respondents to mark their social relationships on concentric circles of different sizes (Ryan *et al.* 2014). Subsequently, the data from the first stage was used to develop the interview schedule for the second stage. In the second stage, 9 participants from the first stage were purposely invited, and 3 participants were recruited from social media. These participants were active users, lurkers, and non-users of WeChat groups to seek social support. Three online focus groups were conducted. Each focus group consisted of active users, lurkers, and non-users of WeChat groups. The criteria of participant recruitment were: 1. First-generation migrant Chinese women in the UK. 2. Giving birth to at least one child in the UK.

Progress

I have completed all data collection and data analysis. Currently, I am writing my doctoral thesis. The thesis is due for submission in December 2025.

Findings from preliminary analysis

Informational support is identified as the main social support provided in WeChat groups for migrant Chinese mothers, and emotional support is identified as the second most popular social support. This finding echoes previous research on social support in online communities. The types of informational support include: health-related information, child-raising information, local activities for children, and strategies for navigating NHS. Emotional support includes alleviating anxiety, reducing isolation, and providing a sense of achievement by helping others. Current research tends to examine informational and emotional support separately. However, findings from this research suggest that informational support should be not separated from emotional support as informational support could also serve to reduce the anxiety caused by child raising. In other words, informational support is also a type of emotional support. Regarding tangible support, it is rare in WeChat groups. This is because most tangible support requires face-to-face interactions. However, migrant Chinese scattered live across the UK. It is difficult to have localized WeChat groups for migrant Chinese mothers. Nevertheless, WeChat groups still show the benefit of enabling group members to do online shopping.

However, WeChat groups do not only provide support, they also have negative impacts on group members. Most participants reported that they can feel strong peer pressure from WeChat groups. The peer pressure from WeChat groups mainly comes from three aspects. The first one is the anxiety of not being a 'good' mother. The second one is the comparison of children's growth and development. The third pressure is the different socioeconomic status in the online groups.

Activities supported by prize and how the prize has enhanced my study

The prize has greatly helped me with my fieldwork and the process of participant recruitment. Charity is one of the main recruitment channels for this research. With the support of the prize fund, I was able to visit three charities that serve migrant Chinese communities in Sheffield and Manchester to develop collaborative relationships. All of them helped me circulate the recruitment post. Additionally, face to face could help the interviewer and interviewees build rapport and include the people who have difficulties with digital technology. My participants live across the England. The prize fund enabled me to travel to see my participants and have face-to-face interviews. Finally, I value the efforts my participants make to participate in interviews. All of them are busy mothers with young babies. Therefore, their time for the interviews was compensated by gift vouchers. With the support of the prize fund, I was able to buy the gift vouchers and send them to my participants.

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