

**The impact of government regulation to the Chinese  
social networking systems (SNS) users in China**

By

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research project is to gain a deeper understanding of the level of knowledge internet users have about the regulation of the Social Networking System (SNS) in China and identify how much and in what ways regulation affects the way SNS systems are used. This project is based on qualitative methods. Its findings may be utilised to give an indication of what internet users think about the regulated SNS in China.

The research employs two data collection methods: focus groups and interviews. Focus groups enable the researcher to assess overall trends and identify other issues the researcher had not already considered. Interviews enable there searcher to conduct a more in-depth exploration of the research topic and allow participants who might feel uneasy in the focus group to express sensitive opinions.

The thesis finds that perceptions of internet users surrounding internet regulation can be separated the two groups: some internet users oppose internet regulation on SNS, and some support internet regulation on SNS. In the first group, the internet users hoped the internet in China could be visited without any censorship. They were aware that the Chinese government wants to create the world's largest intranet in order to control public information. Also, they complained that the standards of censorship in

China were not clear. In addition, the participants admired the free internet in Western countries. However, some internet users were prepared to tolerate government regulations. These users were more likely to self-regulate online. These internet users felt they were helpless and had no choice except observing government regulations. In another group, the internet users supported the internet regulation in China. They could understand why the government had to control online speech, in order to avoid “terrorists” using the internet to incite people to rise up against the government. However, some users in this group complied with Chinese internet regulations in appearance but opposed them in their minds.

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# Abbreviations

NZ	New Zealand
SNS	Social Networking Systems
VPN	Virtual Private Network
WTO	World Trade Organization

# Chapter 1 : Introduction

This research project explores the perceptions that Chinese users who had been in New Zealand of Chinese social networking systems (SNS) have about government regulation of the internet and how the internet users' usage of SNS is influenced by government regulation. SNS is one of the fastest-growing tools of communication in China. Most internet users in China can obtain and discuss the news on SNS anytime and anywhere. Chinese social networking sites appear to be very similar to those in Western countries and include similar features such as online shopping and games. However, the state feels threatened by the internet and information globalization (MacKinnon, 2007). Information which is critical of government policy may be censored because the government thinks it would undermine national unity. This research explores issues of freedom of expression in Chinese SNS and the regulation of the SNS in China.

The unit of analysis of research project is Chinese SNS users who accessed in the New Zealand. The first group of participants comprised Unitec business exchange students who had been in NZ for less than two years. The second group of participants comprised Unitec students who had been living in NZ for more than two years and who knew from experience they could access more information online in NZ than in China. This research aimed to test whether these groups have different perceptions of SNS and

how those differences are expressed, as well as, what the perceptions of the participants is based on their experience in New Zealand using SNS compared with China.

## **Background context**

Literature on internet regulation administration in China can be found from some Chinese sources. The mainstream of Chinese scholars empathise with the Communist Party of China and agree that in order to strengthen the power of the government and protect domestic political stability, some negative information needs to be filtered.

In 1957, Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China, ordered the media of China to follow the policy of “New, old news and no news”. Chen (2010) explains that in order to defend China against perceived American and Japanese imperialist aggression, Mao advocated that: some news had to be published immediately, some old news had to be reported after a long time, and other news was not to be delivered. The information which was “harmful” to the government was blocked. This policy shows that the Chinese government was not so much concerned with the delivery of information, but its media policy was part of a political strategy to limit the flow of information. Mao’s policy has informed Chinese internet information regulation; information which is perceived to endanger the stability of the state would be censored by the government (MacKinnon, 2007). For example, internet-based

information about and communication supporting the independence movement of Tibet is blocked immediately.

However, this strategy is suitable for war, not the age of peace. Deng Xiaoping, the leader of the People's Republic of China from 1978 to 1992, advocated a policy of “reform and opening up” in 1979 (MacKinnon, 2007). Deng opened China’s door and encouraged doing business with the West and learning from Western knowledge. Deng used political and even military force to control the economic process. Deng (1980) said that opening the door to the West would bring in some flies (MacKinnon, 2007). Keeping the state peaceful and unified was the main attention for the government. As a result, the ‘flies’, which represent problems such as endangering the safety of the state, would be ‘swatted’, which means they would be controlled to protect government power. MacKinnon further states that “the internet may be new, but its challenge to the Chinese leadership is not” (2007). The government policy of retaining control of information has continued into the internet era. According to the view by MacKinnon (2007), Deng’s analogy engages some foreign ‘flies’ fly into China which may subvert the regime’s power and legitimacy through spreading anti-Chinese government information on the internet and misleading the public into detesting the government; so the approach of ‘swatting flies’ is also suitable for internet administration.

Compared with the approach of ‘swatting flies’, Hu (2008) (as cited in Chen, 2010), the current leader of China, encouraged the “dredging” of information rather than the “blocking up” of information (p. 131). He told party officials in 2007: “Whether or not we can actively use and effectively manage the Internet...will affect national cultural information, security and the long-term stability of the state” (p. 54, as cited in Scotton and Hachten, 2010). In 2008, Hu explained that the most accurate and authoritative information had to be reported by the government as soon as possible, and at the same time increased the level of press freedom by “dredging” rather than “blocking up” information. To show that he was sincere, President Hu visited the internet users online in June 2008. During a ten-minutes online question and answer session, Hu emphasised five times the idea of “direction of public opinion”, and nine times the idea of “guiding of public opinion”. This shows that the top Chinese leader was aware of the dangers of internet and the importance from the view of the state of controlling public opinion. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences reported that the internet was like a bridge between the governing and the governed that government can aware public’s thinking from the internet (Scotton and Hachten, 2010).

## **Rationale and purpose**

In the context of continued government control of information, the focus of this research is to establish how Chinese internet users perceive SNS in China. The aims

are:

- To identify how much participants know about the regulation of SNS in China
- To identify what Chinese internet users who had been in New Zealand think about the regulation of SNS in China
- To identify the way Chinese internet users who had been in New Zealand use the various SNS in China

The purpose of this research project is:

- To gain a deeper understanding of the level of knowledge Chinese internet users who had been in New Zealand, have about the regulation of the SNS in China
- To identify how much and in what ways regulation affects the way SNS systems are used in China

Although much has already been written on the topic of internet regulation, online freedom and the usage of SNS in China, a review of the literature reveals a need for more qualitative research, which in general dominates the discourse surrounding this topic. This proposed research project aims to fill this gap by providing rich qualitative data on this topic. The findings may be utilised to give an indication of what internet users think about the regulated SNS in China. The findings from the research will be useful for communication specialists by allowing them to have a better understanding

of the development of SNS in China.

## **The research questions**

The purpose of the research produces the following research questions:

- What is the perception of Chinese SNS users who had been in New Zealand about free speech on the internet?
- What is the perception of Chinese SNS users who had been in New Zealand about government regulation in China?

### ***Sub-questions***

The following sub-questions will guide my research:

- How is internet users' usage of SNS influenced by the government regulation?
- How do internet users negotiate mechanisms of government regulation into the use of SNS?

### ***Operational definitions***

SNS in this research project is broadly defined as:

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may

vary from site to site (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 3).

Internet regulation by the Chinese government follows the guidelines set out in Measures for Security Protection Administration of the International Networking of Computer Information Networks (1997) as follows:

No unit or individual shall use the international networking to produce, duplicate, search and disseminate the following information:...(7) information that openly insults others or fabricates facts to slander others; (8) information that damages the reputation of state organs; and(9) other information that violates the Constitution, laws and administrative regulations (p. 1).

The purpose of this section is to show that this type of information is seen as a threat by the Chinese government.

The so-called Great Firewall is defined as:

A massive, sophisticated, national censorship system that uses a number of techniques- Internet address and domain name system tampering, IP address blocking, Web site blocking, key-word filtering, and such-to automatically control and restrict the stream of Internet communication entering or leaving China, for political and economic protectionist purpose (Eko, Kumar and Yao, 2011, p. 5).

Freedom of opinion is defined as:



Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his or her choice (Article 19, 2000, p. 3)

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Internet administration in China

This section presents a view of the literature that is relevant to internet administration in China and other countries. The review of the literature will examine the history of government information control and conduct, as well as the history of political freedom in China.

The internet is a double edged sword for the government. On the one hand, the Chinese government encourages the improvement of infrastructure and internet penetration by active government investment and competition. For example, in the technology sector, the telecommunications industry allows foreign companies to invest in basic telecom and value-added telecom services. On the other hand, the government heavily regulates and monitors the internet. Foerstel (1998) argues that the internet which refers to the press, radio, television, and the fax, was controlled by the government. It is difficult to control such a dispersed form of communication. The internet users can get the information which the government feels being attacked. Sina Weibo, one of the most popular SNS in China, has changed the way of online communication that it becomes more transparent and direct. The Weibo users can immediately send the messages and images what they saw. Through internet communication local people can easily debate sensitive issues. The traditional media can also join the discussion instantly (as cited

in Hewitt, 2012).

Xue (2005) says that “national governments formulate their internet and information policy based on their political regime, level of economic development, and cultural beliefs” (p. 247). Compared with the contribution of the economic value of the internet, the Chinese government has been more concerned about national unity and political stability that means keeping the state in peace and Communist one-party policy. However, from the Communist Party’s perspective, free political opinions and indecent materials, in particular, about ideological extremism, political violence, and ‘terrorism’, may endanger national unity, as they are seen as threats to China’s political and social values. The government would control the online information as before (Endeshaw, 2004).

According to statistics from China.com.cn, more than 50 internet laws and regulations were issued in China from February 1994 to 2005. For example, *The Law for Security of Computer Information Systems*, which was disseminated by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China in 1994, states that any organisation or individual should not endanger the interest of the state, collectives and citizens by using computer information systems. Also, the treaty of *Self-discipline in the Internet* was established by the Internet Society of China in 2004. Four hundred members of legal companies, research institutes, academic associations, universities and other organisations signed

the treaty, which states that members should not produce, post or spread any information that may endanger the safety of the state and society, and furthermore, that they should monitor the information that users send in their websites.

The main purpose of most internet laws and regulations is to suppress information, which is regarded as helping to subvert state power, undermine national unity, and harm national honour and interests (MacKinnon, 2007). In particular, “ideological extremism, political violence, and ‘terrorism’ are among the major national security challenges, the People’s Republic of China is confronted with” (Acharya, Gunaratna & Pengxin, 2010, p. 1). Burke (2004) (as cited in Thussu, 2006) states that extremists who are willing to do illegal things in order to undermine the state unity are more likely to use the internet because it is a good platform to show their militant videos of violent actions, such as bombings and massacres. The video of the September 11 attacks that four passengers jets were hijacked by the Islamists militant group Al Qaeda and crashed into the towers of the World Trade Center, is an obvious example of Al Qaeda successes to use internet to show their violent actions. However, there is no ‘terrorists’ displaying their violent actions on internet in China, because any video with sensitive information would be censored. For example, Tengfei Yuan, *the New York Times* called him “the most famous maverick teacher in China these days”, is a famous high school history teacher (Mu, 2010). His lectures which contain sensitive information such as the Cultural Revolution were full of wit and humour. As a result, his lectures

videos had been clicked more than 1 million times in a month (Shi, 2009). However, these videos were censored totally without any explanation recently. The government believes these videos may destabilise the state and threaten national stability, which looks simply that government propaganda used to suppress political dissent (MacKinnon, 2007). Obviously, comparing with the Al Qaeda's action, Tengfei Yuan's speech which contains his emotional opinions has less threat to the government. Moreover, "terrorists" can use the anonymity of the internet, so it is hard to find out the identity of the information senders. This greatly reduces the possibility of the real identity of the person uploading the material being discovered (Seib & Janbek, 2010, p. 32). This is the main reason why the Chinese government feels it has to filter the information that may seriously undermine national unity and honor. However, the state policy may be too extreme that the dissidents, who may not threaten the stability of the Chinese state, would be seemed as ideological extremism, political violence or 'terrorism' in China. Xiaobo Liu, a human right activist, was awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize for "long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human right in China". However, he was arrested in 2009 on suspicion of "inciting subversion of state power" (Lim, 2009).

The OpenNet Initiative aims to investigate, expose and analyse internet censorship. It categorizes four types of censorship through four filters: (1) political, (2) social, (3) conflict and security, and (4) internet tools. As a result, the OpenNet Initiative (2010)

claims that:

China's internet filtering regime is the most sophisticated effort of its kind in the world. Compared to similar efforts in other states, China's filtering regime is pervasive, sophisticated, and effective. It comprises multiple levels of legal regulation and technical control. It involves numerous state agencies and thousands of public and private personnel (para. 11).

For example, the entire YouTube site is blocked nationwide by the Great Firewall, which means the technique can censor the websites that may endanger the safety of the state. In Tsui's (2007) opinion, the Great Firewall is used to keep the "barbarians" out of China. YouTube hosts a lot of political propaganda attacking China, but it may be unnecessary to totally block the website.

## **Internet regulations in other countries**

Other countries filter and monitor the internet according to the country's interests and purposes. For example, the United States government is concerned with child pornography, Singaporean internet users have to register to access political and religious sites, the German government filters neo-Nazi websites, and the Jordanian government guards against sexually explicit information (Lovelock, 1996).

The Singaporean government shows a sophisticated approach to censorship. For

example, information going to homes is more heavily censored than information going to businesses. Ang and Nadarajan (2006) state that the Singaporean government has taken this approach so it can balance the need for high technology and the goal of censorship.

In the United States, repetition Congress passed legislation surrounding internet management and child protection, including the Child Online Protection Act, the Children's Internet Protection Act, and the Children's Privacy Protection and Parental Empowerment Act (Wang, 2009). However, these Acts were opposed by internet operators and the civil rights organisation who claim they violate the First Amendment, namely freedom of speech.

The United Arab Emirates focuses on blocking pornographic information online. According to the report by OpenNet Initiative in 2009, the content on the internet which is considered objectionable for religious and cultural reasons would be blocked by the Smart Filter. Pornography, gambling, and religious conversion cannot be shown online (OpenNet, 2009).

## **Online freedom in China**

Some Chinese authors argue that China is not ready for pure democracy. Internet democracy can be considered as the most fair and civilised form of democracy;

however, pure democracy may not mean one thing is decided by all the people, but rather a small number of people (Li, 2009). Huntington (1989) (as cited in Li, 2009) believes that when the political system is not mature, out of control political participants may cause more political instability (p. 33). Huntington further states that although there are 1.3 billion people in China, the gap in education levels is too wide. The proportion of people who have a low level of education is much greater than the proportion that has a high level of education. As a result, if pure democracy is carried out, decisions will be greatly dependent on the decisions of people who have a low level of education. Likewise, Ma (2011) says that “the main reason given for the severity of the internet policy in China relates to the fact that the government has prioritized the protection of the states interest above all else” (p. 7). Tsui (2007) states that according to a survey in 2005 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the highest academic research organization in philosophy and social sciences in China, 36.8% of participants support controlling or managing the internet and 8% of participants believe that the political content should be controlled. The purpose of the system is asking users to take responsibility for their posts. There is no total online freedom (Barnett, 2012). “Security officials can monitor what dissidents are up to” (“Breaching the Great Firewall,” 2010, para. 7). Moreover, the internet users would self-censor online. Cannici (2009) points out that those Chinese companies that want to join China’s online industry have to sign the “Public Pledge of Self-Regulation and Professional Ethics for China Internet Industry”. These companies agree to monitor the



information that the users send on their websites and self-censor sensitive information.

Alternatively, some authors believe there is less free expression online due to surveillance by the Chinese government. According to Liang (2011), the Chinese Communist Party regards the internet as being no different from any other form of media delivering information. The CCP wants to control public information by creating the world's largest intranet. The SNSs can be so popular in China because they are not to challenge the censors (Scotton and Hachten, 2010). "Now Sina Weibo and Chinese social-media sites are the target of a new government crackdown", suggests Beech (2011, p.50). For example, Weibo has an 80-point contract for users to restrict online speech. Every account starts with 80 points. The users gain more points by sending promotional activities; however, if they break the rules, such as spreading rumours, they lose points. The users would receive a warning if their points fell below 60. Their accounts would even be cancelled if their account hit zero ("China's Weibo microblog introduces user contracts," 2012). Furthermore, messages containing dissent and democratic information would be immediately reported to the local police (Anti, 2012) (as cited in Hewitt, 2012).

Some internet users disagree with restricted online speech. Business has been affected by the online control by the government (Endeshaw, 2004). The World Trade

Organization (WTO) has complained that Chinese internet censorship should be stopped as censorship obstructs world trade (Seidenberg, 2010). Facebook, Youtube and Twitter are still banned in China. Furthermore, Chinese internet users may be dissatisfied not only because Western sites are forbidden, but also because Chinese websites are censored (Moskvitch, 2012). Lu (2012), editor of Tea Leaf Nation, which reports on China's social media, said that “yesterday afternoon, when I did a search for the term 'Bo Xilai' it returned 1.2 million results, however, last night when I did the same search there were 180,000 results. So a lot of censoring already happened in that time” (as cited in “China's new rules for microblog users take effect,” 2012). An internet user from Shenzhen, who usually bypasses the Great Firewall of China, said, “All I can say is, fake democracy is thinner than paper” (as cited in Yip, 2012). In order to express their discontent, some Weibo users have posted messages such as “goodbye Weibo” and “time to move on to Twitter”, as well as calling on their friends to migrate to other SNS (“Beijing orders new controls on 'Weibo' microblogs,” 2012).

Moreover, standards of censorship in China are unclear. The Measure for Security Protection Administration of the International Networking of Computer Information Network in China, which is a state policy used to regulate internet information, was spread by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China in 1994. It states that “no unit or individual shall use the international networking to produce, duplicate, search and disseminate the information that instigates the splitting up of the country and

sabotage of national unity” (1997, p. 1). For most Chinese internet users it is not clear what is permitted and what is not (Cui, 2011). As with this measure, most internet regulations in China have not showed clearly what information is forbidden online.

In 2011, Freedom House, a U.S. Non-Governmental Organization, which is primarily funded by the US government, measured 37 countries’ levels of internet and new media freedom according to the three broad categories: (1) barriers to access, (2) information control, and (3) human rights abuse. As a result, China is listed as not having a free internet and being ranked in the last quarter of 37 countries.

Some Chinese scholars have highlighted the phenomena of the “50 cent party”. These internet commentators are employed by the government and paid 50 Chinese cents for each positive comment which commends the governmental and political actions on the internet. The 50cent party is used to look for bad news on websites and internet forums, and then negates them or spins them into good news. Ping (2010) argues that the job of “internet commentators” is immoral. The online commentators are anonymously organised to affect public opinion. These comments are delivered by the government, so they do not represent freedom of speech by citizens (Chen, 2010). In addition, Mao (2012), the director of the research center of anti-corruption and incorruption government in Renmin University of China, describes the 50cent party as a weak measure for controlling the information by Chinese government. The

information, whether it is sent by the 50cent party or normal internet users, is easily distinguished by most Chinese internet users.

## **The social networking services (SNS) in China**

Renren, Kaixin001 and Sina Weibo are the three main SNS in China. Lukoff (2011) states that there are 95 million students and white collar users among the 170 million registered users in Renren. Most Kaixin001 users are white collar workers, who are interested in online games, news and jokes. Sina Weibo is regarded as a Chinese equivalent of Twitter, but actually surpasses it in the number of active users, with more than 100 million users registered.

Some Chinese internet consumers are greatly attracted by the online games. Chen and Haley (2011) consider that Chinese white collar workers work under strong pressures and take few weekends and holidays. These games on Kaixin are seen as a platform for these people to contact friends and enjoy a break from their busy jobs.

Internet users can discuss their opinion with others on SNS. Du (2011) states the theory of the spiral of silence becomes invalid when considered in relation to Weibo. Noelle-Neumann (as cited in Du, 2011) asserts that “a person is less likely to voice an opinion on a topic if he feels that he is in the minority for fear of reprisal or isolation from the majority”(para. 11). However, these people can express their feelings online

by their nicknames, so that no one knows who they are, and thus they are free from fear of reprisal or isolation from the majority.

In addition, SNS changes the way people read the news. In the past, internet users often visited portals, and then they read the news they were interested in. However, today a large number of people visit SNS first (Scotton and Hachten, 2010). After that, they browse the information that friends have posted online (Shanghai Journalism Review, 2010). Although getting the information from SNS can save some time, the internet users may lose other valuable news, such as political news.

## **The impact of internet control on the use of online social networks**

Internet control always takes place in SNS. Many sensitive keywords are censored by the Great Firewall, which is used to control what users search for and post on SNS (Mozur, 2012). Furthermore, in 2011 Beijing officials announced a ‘real name system’ on SNS that forces users to register new SNS accounts with users’ real identification information. It can reduce the freewheeling speeches online (Wong, 2011).

Some internet users can do nothing against the internet control on SNS other than shutting down their Weibo. These users show their dissatisfaction through that way.

Han (2012) states that:

This is sad for our nation and tragic for our country. If there is no freedom in criticism, then there is no meaning in praise. A country that does not allow normal criticism cannot become a powerful country. A powerful country does not live in fear (as cited in “What happens to free speech on Weibo after real name registration,” para. 4).

Also, He (2012) says that:

I expect Weibo to lose too many internet users after real name registration. No one is sure how to get through the registration process, and those in remote areas or overseas will probably not do so since it's too much trouble (as cited in “What happens to free speech on Weibo after real name registration,” para. 4).

Chinese internet users who want to access banned sites resist the information regulation in many ways. Chinascope (2007) states Chinese internet users are playing the game of “cat and mouse” with their government. Although some sensitive words or websites are filtered by Chinese government, some internet users set up proxy servers, which are outside China, to connect to websites. They can get the original information from the websites. Xiaomi (as cited in Talbot, 2010), who experiences the Great Firewall firsthand, believes the wall “eventually will fail” (p. 67).

Some internet users are not concerned about censorship of the internet by the Chinese government. Most participants feel the Chinese SNS basically meets their demands,

although they are aware that much information is filtered online (Sirhan, 2012) (as cited in Moskvitch, 2012). Cannnici (2009) states that Chinese internet users do not care about the filtered internet or the “Western concept of public sphere”. He further points out that “to them, the internet is not a revolutionary tool to plot political coups, but a place they can more easily communicate with other Chinese about daily concerns” (p. 8). “The purpose of SNS is to keep these students connected as they grow older and more affluent and thus even more attractive to advertisers” (Scotton and Hachten, 2010). They further explain that when the users are unhappy, they can leave messages on their SNS and wait to be cheered up by their friends.

Internet users observe the internet regulation online but show their feelings online in other ways. The Great Firewall cannot stop debate over censorship itself (Ramzy, 2010). “Government regulation can hardly catch up with the rapid development of the convergent technology” (Ang & Nadarajan, 1997) (as cited in Zhao, 2008). Chinese internet users have enough technical knowledge, guile and courage to share forbidden information (Anderson, 2009). They are finding inventive ways to spread information (Calingaert, 2010). For example, users strategically edit their posts, such as using abbreviated sensitive words, and climbing the Great Firewall by VPN (Virtual Private Network), which creates a secure tunnel by encrypting data, are the main tools for avoiding censorship. Scotton and Hachten (2010) point out that some internet users use “blank space” in their sensitive messages to avoid the censorship. “China’s

internet users have managed to tweet- and re-tweet some one million posts on the latest developments so far” (Yip, para. 4, 2012). Chinese internet users have demonstrated creativity in finding methods to express themselves. Just like a flow of water, “if you block one direction, it flows to other directions or overflows” (James, para. 5, 2009). Xiao (as cited in Ramzy, 2010), states that some Chinese mainland users bypass the Great Firewall and visit Twitter, and then repost the information on mainland blogs like Weibo.

However, Chinese internet users’ attentions are manipulated by the Chinese government. Although the young people are the main internet users, they have little interest in politics. According to a 2000 survey about their “heroes”, there is only one politician on the list of top 100. Most “heroes” were singers, artists (Scotton and Hachten, 2010). Cannici (2009) points out that most Chinese people are not angry about the restricted internet. To them, the internet is primarily used to communicate with others. The current social networking sites provide games, jokes, videos and gossip news, which fill the people’s requirement for communication and entertainment.

Einhorn and Keenan (2002) claim that although Beijing tries to control the internet, the number of Chinese online has increased from about 20 million in 2000 to more than 40 million in 2002. According to the Statistical Report on the Internet Development in China by the China Internet Network Information Center, there are 538 million internet users in China in 2012 (Lu, 2012).



Chinese internet users' online discussions have been successfully directed by the government. Hu (2008) (as cited in Chen, 2010), the current Paramount leader of China, encouraged "dredging" rather than "blocking up" information (p. 131). The government leadership is aware that the internet is a good way to direct public opinion. Xuan (2009), the vice secretary, proprietor and chief editor of Shenzhen Press Group, said that with the development of Chinese society, people's democratic aspirations are increasing rapidly. The media must conform to people's requirements and set the platforms which are used to intercommunicate. Chen (2011) (as cited in Wang, 2011), the chief editor of Sina, states that refuting rumours is used to establish a harmonious society online by the government. News which may cause a big reaction online would be checked and verified, and then be released online. This action greatly reduces the discussion and discontent among the internet users as well as preserving harmony. Yang (2011) considers that knowing people's thoughts and then talking about the problem is the best way to avoid aggravating a matter.

In the literature review, it presented the internet administration in China with comparison to other countries, online freedom in China, the social networking services in China and the impact of internet control on the use of online social network. The research needs an appropriate methodology to investigate the findings in literature reviews.

## Chapter 3: Research Design

The proposed research sits within a phenomenological research paradigm. The methodology chosen allows for utilizing two data collection tools: interviews and focus groups. A total of 16 to 18 participants, who are both Unitec business international students recently arrived in NZ from China and who have been living in NZ over two years, were chosen for both the focus group and interviews. In this section, qualitative data will be collected and analysed. As well, ethical problems will be considered seriously.

“Qualitative research manifests an interest in understanding how people make sense of their world and experiences they have in the world” (Winegardner, 2000, p. 1). The research questions in this project are about internet users’ perceptions and usage of the regulated SNS in China. Through qualitative method, the researcher can capture in-depth insights and understanding of participants’ feelings and perceptions of their internet use.

Qualitative data collection provides a more relevant basis for analysis and interpretation. Neuman (1997) states “qualitative researchers emphasize the importance of social context for understanding the social world” (p. 331). Moreover, qualitative research is used to “explain how people attribute meaning to their circumstances and how they develop and make use of rules which govern their behavior” (Candy, 1989, p.

2). In this research, the regulated internet is the social context. The question of how the internet users perceive the internet rules and how they use the internet can be better understood through a method which illuminates users' perceptions and experiences of internet censorship.

## **Data collection and sampling**

Half of internet users in China are aged from 18 to 24 years old. A total of 68 percent of internet users are younger than 30 years old (Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China, 2008). Furthermore, more than half of SNS users are aged from 20 to 29 years ("Latest statistics on online SNS usage in China", 2009). As a result, the participants in this research were young people under the age of 30. A total of 16 to 18 participants, who are both Unitec business international students recently arrived in NZ from China and who have been living in NZ over two years, were chosen for both the focus group and interviews. Posters calling for volunteers were placed on campus. The research aimed to engage 16 participants, with 2 extra students in case of dropouts. Some snacks and drinks were provided to research participants.

Two data collection methods were used. The focus group, which comprised 8 participants, was the first data collection method, followed by 8 interviews. Focus groups enable the researcher to assess overall trends and identify other issues not

previously considered in the proposal. The interviews allowed the researcher an in-depth exploration of the research topic and allowed participants who might have felt uneasy in the focus group to express sensitive opinions.

### ***Focus group***

Focus groups have been described as “a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards a product, service, concept, advertisement, idea, or packaging” (Henderson, 2009, p. 28). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) states that, “Group discussion produces data and insights that would be less accessible without interaction found in a group setting” (p. 182).

The group participants were eight Chinese students who were studying at Unitec. The mini focus group was appropriate as members could talk as much as they wanted. Group members could speak Mandarin to share their experience of the Chinese internet in the meeting. Half of research participants were Unitec business exchange or international students who had recently arrived in NZ from China. These students had not yet integrated into the local society and, importantly, were users of Chinese SNS. The others were Chinese Unitec students who had been living in NZ for more than two years. They would have used the Western SNS in NZ and would know the difference between Chinese SNS and the Western SNS. The meeting lasted about 60 to 90 minutes in the postgraduate meeting room of Unitec. The method allowed interaction with more

participants in less time. The group discussion was recorded. If participants were sensitive about their voices being recorded, the researcher took notes by hand. See appendix 3 for the draft guideline of questions.

### ***Interviews***

In this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted. In the interviews, the participants were asked how they perceived and used the SNS in China. In addition, new questions were asked according to what different participants said. For example, if you are concerned by internet censorship, how do you resolve this problem?(See appendix 4 for the draft questions guideline).The interviews allowed more in-depth exploration of the research topic and allowed participants who might have felt uneasy in the focus group to express sensitive opinions (Neuman, 2000).

Kvale (1983) (as cited in King, 1994) states that the purpose of an interview is to “gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviews with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (p. 14). Collis and Hussey (2003) explain that the researcher can use this method to collect data in which selected participants answer questions in order to know what they do, think or feel (Collis & Hussey, 2003).

Interviews lasted 20 to30 minutes for each participant. Four Unitec business exchange or international students who had recently arrived in NZ from China were interviewed.

They were expected to have used Chinese SNS to connect with friends in China. The other four were Unitec students who had been living in NZ for more than two years and used a mix of SNS in NZ. The interviews were held in a quiet meeting room at Unitec. Interviews were recorded, but transcriptions were anonymised and respondents listed as 'subject A,' 'subject B,' etc. See appendix 4 for the draft question guideline.

## **Data analysis**

The data analysis was initiated by reducing the data. Miles and Huberman (1994) (as cited in Collis and Hussey, 2003) describe "data reduction [as] a form of analysis that sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards and reorganizes data in such a way that 'final' conclusions can be drawn and verified" (p. 11). Data records, documents, and interviews were collected. Interviews were condensed and made manageable. The rough notes were converted into useful information and the Chinese notes and interview records were translated into English.

Collis and Hussey (2003) suggest that researchers "start coding the data as early as possible. This will involve allocating a specific code to each variable, concept or theme that you wish to identify" (Collis & Hussey, 2003, p. 264). Bryman (2004) suggests "this may sharpen the researcher's understanding of their data and help with theoretical sampling" (Bryman, 2004, p. 408). It also helps avoid confusion if large amounts of data are involved. The data for this study was stored and can be retrieved and

reorganised in different ways, for example, the codes could be grouped into smaller categories by the relevant themes.

In analysing qualitative data, the researcher would rethink, reflect, and recognise after the data collection was finished. Manen (1997) states that 'rethinking', 'reflecting' and 'recognizing' are a good way to understand participants' feelings (Manen, 1997). The researcher considered the participants' background, beliefs, attitudes and experiences.

The findings are summarised and any issues identified below. The summaries allowed the researcher to construct propositions, which helped with testing theories.

## **Ethical considerations**

An ethics approval Form A was submitted to the Unitec Ethics Committee (UREC). Participants were informed about the purpose of the research project. Interviews were recorded, but transcriptions were anonymised and respondents listed as 'subject A,' 'subject B,' etc. Participants could withdraw from the interview at any time. If they wished, they could request a copy of the research proposal. These ethical considerations helped participants feel more comfortable in the research. All data was transcribed and treated confidentially.

## Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the perceptions of study participants with respect to Chinese internet regulations on SNS. Participants offered a great deal of data, which provides a general overview about how online freedom and internet regulations have been perceived by these participants, and how they use and incorporate mechanisms of government regulation into their use of SNS. The sub-headings in this section reflect these conversation categories, which also formed the basis for the focus group and interview questions' guideline. The participants' statements have been translated by researcher into English. The discussion in this chapter is linked to the literature reviews, which provides the short summary and findings of the main points.

### General findings

Participants in the first group had been living in NZ for more than two years. In this group, the focus group participants' names were listed as FG1, FG2, FG3 and FG4. The interview participants' names were listed as I1, I2, I3 and I4. FG2 and I2 were the same participants. The 8 participants from the other group had been living in NZ for less than two years. The focus group participants' names were given as FG5, FG6, FG7 and FG8. The interview participants' names were given as I5, I6, I7 and I8. In this group, FG6 and I6 was the same person, and FG7 and I7 was the same person.



Table 1: Distribution of Focus Group and Interview Participants

	Focus group	Interview
Living in NZ for more than two years	FG1, FG2, FG3 and FG4	I1, I2, I3 and I4
Living in NZ for less than two years	FG5, FG6, FG7 and FG8	I5, I6, I7 and I8

In this table, FG1, FG3, FG4, FG5 and FG8 are different people to I1, I3, I4, I5 and I8.

But FG2 and I2 are the same person, same as FG6 and I6; and FG7 and I7.

## **Online freedom**

This section was designed to investigate the participants' use of SNS and the perception of online freedom in China.

### ***The use of SNS in China***

Xiaonei and Weibo are the most popular SNS in China. FG1 said that "I always share interesting or funny stuff on SNS" (FG1, in NZ more than two years). FG4 said that "I like to get Chinese news, view friends' status on Renren" (FG2, in NZ more than two years). FG5 said that "I usually view news, status, interesting stories and photos on SNS. That information is all based on real life"(FG5, in NZ less than two years). FG8 stated that "I like to view friends' status and post mine about what we did today. I read the news as well, and make comments on the football forum" (FG8, in NZ less than two years). In general, there was no difference in the two groups' usage. Sharing

information and status without the political engagement were the main function of Chinese SNS.

### ***The perception of free speech on the internet***

This section was designed to investigate participants' perception of free speech on the internet.

The questions aimed to identify how much participants knew about the regulation of SNS in China and asked: What is your perception of free speech on the internet? Most participants who had lived in NZ for more than two years clarified why the Chinese government regulates the internet. FG3 stated that:

Internet regulation is suitable for China because of the huge population. The population of China ranks first in the world. This situation brings many problems to the state, for example, the big gap between the rich and poor, which may easily make the poor people feel the social inequality, in particular, getting unfair treatment news from the internet, such as the news of government corruption. They would be annoyed that while rich people can get money so easily, their lives are so hard. After that, they may seek revenge on society without distinguishing the news between the true and false. It is the main challenge for the Chinese government, as well as why the Chinese government cannot open the internet totally such as in the US. (FG3, in NZ more than two years).

Likewise, FG2 stated the level of online freedom was dependent on the quality of

citizens (FG2, in NZ more than two years). I3 identified a number of reasons for the Chinese government to control online speech, such as the huge population, and the huge gap between rich and poor. They cited that there were a great number of people who were illiterate; having either a low level of education or no education at all. Therefore, the government worry these people may be vulnerable to “terrorists” who want to undermine the safety of the state through illegal demonstration and violent actions. In order to prevent this, the Chinese government conceals some news (I3, in NZ more than two years). However, they pointed out some inconsistencies of the regulation. FG1 said:

There are no clear standards of internet censorship. I had sent some comments about Chinese politics, which I thought would not endanger the safety of China. However, they were censored by the internet regulators. I do not know why it would have seemed as anti-government information and how it would undermine the safety of the state. Can the internet users discuss government actions online anymore? What is the bottom line of the negative discussion? (FG1, in NZ more than two years).

The internet users do not understand why the information would be censored. Furthermore, FG2 said that the function of reporting somebody’s post is comparable to the sufferings caused by the Cultural Revolution (FG2, in NZ more than two years).

By contrast, the members who had lived in NZ for less than two years strongly sought online freedom in China. They were not aware of the issues raised by others, such as

the difficulties of controlling the state's safety and political stability that retaining a Communist one-party dictatorship system given the huge population. Compared with the participants of the group who had lived in NZ for more than two years, they knew less about Chinese politics. They complained that there was less freedom online in China but did not know why the government had to control the internet. FG5 stated that he/she hated the Great Firewall, which made them lose a lot of information online. He/she could not visit Youtube in China. He/she had not heard any information about Tiananmen Square in 1989 yet, which makes he/she felt they missed much information and out of touch with the world. He/she stated that the government should share political content as transparently as possible, for example, releasing information of the Tiananmen Square in 1989 (FG5, in NZ less than two years).

## **Internet regulation**

This section was designed to evaluate participants' awareness of internet regulation by the Chinese government, awareness of requiring genuine personal information, and the influence of internet regulation.

### ***Awareness of internet regulation***

The two groups' members were aware that under the Chinese government internet regulations, some information and websites were censored. They could easily give examples during the interviews and conversations. FG1 said "the sensitive words, such as 'the Communist Party', will be censored". FG5 said "We cannot use Facebook in

China”. I3 said that:

I remember when I was in high school in NZ, someone told me about Tian’anmen Square protests in 1989 and I did not believe it at first. I feel it would be impossible that the government killed student protesters on Tian’anmen Square by using armed tanks, because I have never seen anything about this in my Chinese textbook when I was in school in China. I used to feel that China was a peaceful country. When I heard about this I felt cheated (I3, in NZ more than two years).

I8 said: “I know the internet is regulated by the government. For example, the function of making comments on Sina Weibo had been closed, rectified and reformed the system and information from March to April, 2012” (I8, in NZ less than two years).

### ***Awareness of requiring genuine personal information***

The group members who had lived in NZ for more than two years knew that the system of real name register on SNS is impossible to be applied. FG4 said “The personal information may not be real. There is no way to prove the users’ real name. The users still can register by the fake information, such as name, school and photos” (FG4, in NZ more than two years). Likewise, I2 stated:

Weibo said they are going to implement real name registration system, but it has not been applied yet. Actually, it is impossible to apply this system, because people would use others’ ID information to register on Chinese SNS. Furthermore, one set

of ID information can be registered on many accounts. My foreign boss used my name and ID number to register his account (I2, in NZ more than two years).

However, members who had lived in NZ for less than two years supported the system. FG7 pointed out that “users need to register on SNS with the real name because Renren can contact old friends who have not been heard from for a long time” (FG7, in NZ less than two years). Likewise, I6 said:

I think real name register on SNS benefits most people. It is easier to know and contact others on the site. Moreover, it has options to protect your personal information. Honesty is the advantage of Renren compared to other SNS. Renren was originally founded for finding schoolmates. For example, you may find your primary schoolmates who you have not contacted for over years by remembering his or her name through Renren (I6, in NZ less than two years).

Furthermore, I7 said:

In the past, SNS was just like a platform for online crime. Many young ladies were cheated out of money, even murdered, by the online offenders. Now, the real name system can reduce online crime. The offenders could not conceal their identity and do illicit activities because the police could easily get their personal information. I think the real name register on SNS avoids internet users from being cheated online (I7, in NZ less than two years).

### ***Influences of internet regulation***

Most participants who had lived in NZ for more than two years were aware of internet control and said that bothered them. FG1 said “Yes. The internet regulation by the government bothers me much. I would feel worried and depressed if my information is sensitive, which may make me being arrested” (FG1, in NZ more than two years). FG2 said “Yes. I cannot get the news that I want. For example, there is no news about Xilai Bo on the internet in China” (FG2, in NZ more than two years).

However, one participant who had lived in NZ for more than two years and most of the participants who have lived in NZ for less than two years felt regulation was acceptable because they did not care about the news. I3 said:

The Chinese internet regulation generally does not bother me. For example, after the high-speed train accident in 2011, although Sina deleted some information about this news that made me upset, I did not really mind because it is too far away from my life as I am in NZ. I might talk about this accident with my friend, but I did not post anything about it on Weibo Sina (I3, in NZ more than two years).

Likewise, I5 said:

Actually, it is fine. The internet is regulated more these days. The information about revolt in Chongqing and Guangzhou is censored. I do not urgently want to know the news. The news would not be filtered totally, but the internet users cannot get deeper

information online. I can easily get more information in NZ, but it is difficult to do that in China. I would not use any method to get more information, because there is no direct relation between the information and me. I am just a student (I5, in NZ less than two years).

## **Censorship**

This section was designed to investigate the participants' perspectives of censorship on SNS in China. It includes the experience of messages being censored and sending sensitive information

### ***The experience of messages being censored***

The two groups' experiences of whether their messages were censored were similar. Most participants expressed that they had experienced their messages being censored on Chinese SNS. FG2 stated:

I have the experience that my articles were censored in the SNS. For example, my articles about Yunhui Qian, who is a fifty-five years old elected and popular Eastern head who had a long history of petitioning against alleged abuse by local government, died on December 25, 2010 after being crushed by the front wheel of a truck loaded with crushed rocks, were all censored in the internet (FG2, in NZ more than two years).



Likewise, I5 said:

Some negative opinion I sent on Weibo, such as commenting on the fake baby milk powder, would be censored very fast. After that, a reminder that ‘the news was censored’ appeared on my Weibo home page. However the Weibo internet regulator had never explained to me why the news was censored. I felt unhappy about the censorship. I think my opinions may show some terrible social phenomena, but they are just some personal comments, which would not endanger the safety of China (I5, in NZ less than two years).

However, some participants stated that their messages were not censored online. FG4 said “I am not aware of censorship on Chinese SNS. I do not send sensitive words which may endanger the safety of China. I am a good citizen, which means I would not do any activity which is not allowed by the government” (FG4, in NZ more than two years). FG3, I3 and I8’s provided similar responses.

### ***Sending sensitive information***

The two groups’ perspectives of refraining from sending sensitive information if they knew it might be censored were similar. Some participants said they would not send sensitive information. I3 said that “I would not repost sensitive news because I do not want the negative images about the terrible social phenomena to be repeated again and again. For example, the photos of Tiananmen Square in 1989 can be a warning but

they also may hurt other people as well. These photos are permeated with blood and violence” (I3, in NZ more than two years). I7 said that “I will not do that. The news would be censored very quickly. I would not log into my account again. I do not seek trouble for myself” (I7, in NZ less than two years). FG8 said “I ignore it, because I’m just a normal person in the big world. My comments are not convincing; they cannot make any difference to such a big issue” (FG8, in NZ less than two years).

However, some participants said they would post sensitive information even if they knew it may be censored. FG2 said that “I will repost them again and again”.FG5 said that:

I will repost them sometimes. For example, I reposted the topic of conflicts between China and Japan on territory. The information would be filtered if the government did not like it. But I will repost it anyway because I think it is a way to show I love China and I believe the Angling Island is forever Chinese territory. I hope I can call on other SNS users to firmly believe that (FG5, in NZ less than two years).

## **Behavioral response**

This section was designed to identify the way Chinese internet users use the various SNS in China. It includes the usage of SNS influenced by government regulation, the demands of SNS, the differences between Chinese and other Western SNS sites, and changing opinions.

### ***Usage of SNS influenced by the government regulation***

The participants who have lived in NZ for more than two years ignored the Great Firewall in China. In contrast, they paid attention to avoid censorship of what they sent. They always edited their words to avoid online censorship. FG4 said “The sensitive words can be abbreviated to some letters, such as ‘Communist Party of China’ can be abbreviated to ‘CPC’” (FG4, in NZ more than two years). Likewise, FG2 said “Sometimes, photos can replace words. My friend used a photo, which contains the words of ‘Tian’anmen Square in 1989’, to successfully escape censorship” (FG2, in NZ more than two years).

However, because the participants from the other group had lived outside of China for a shorter time, they were more interested in how to get information from China without it being blocked by the Great Firewall. They usually used software to climb the wall and hide their real identity. FG6 said “I always use a VNP to bypass the Great Firewall, and then visit YouTube and some foreign BBS (Bulletin Board System)” (FG6, in NZ less than two years). Likewise, FG8 said “Climbing over the wall’ is everything” (FG8, in NZ less than two years).

### ***The demands of SNS***

Most participants feel Chinese SNS basically met their demands. FG4 said “For me, it’s OK. SNS is not a must have in life”(FG4, in NZ more than two years). Likewise, FG8

said “Basically I am satisfied, because I only use basic features for communicating with my friends” (FG8, in NZ less than two years). I2 said “Chinese SNS can meet my demands. I use it to connect with my friends. I do not care if the news I send will be censored. I will just resend the news” (I2, in NZ more than two years). I8 said “Well, I think some interesting news and photos are enough on SNS. The political information is not necessary shown on SNS” (I8, in NZ less than two years).

### ***Differences between Chinese and other Western SNS sites***

Most participants believe that Facebook is freer than Chinese SNS. FG3 said that “We can talk nonsense. Dirty words such as “fuck” would not be filtered on Facebook. It is OK to say everything on Western SNS” (FG3, in NZ more than two years). I3 said that “Westerners feel self-expression is important” (I3, in NZ more than two years). Furthermore, I8 stated that “We can add any friends anywhere on Facebook; however, we can only add Chinese friends on Chinese SNS” (I8, in NZ less than two years). FG5 said “Internet users do not need to register an account with a real name on Facebook. But Chinese SNS needs real photos and names. After that, the application needs to be investigated. The Chinese SNS register process is slower than Facebook” (FG5, in NZ less than two years).

In addition, some participants who had lived in NZ for more than two years expressed that usage of SNS between Chinese and Western users is different. FG3 said “In China,

people are very interested in the information that the government hides. However, in NZ, most news is open, which means people do not care about the political news” (FG3, in NZ more than two years). Likewise, I2 said that “Western users like to add political leadership on Facebook and view their status what they cannot see from the politics news. However, they do not care about politics because the news is mostly open” (I2, in NZ more than two years).

### ***Changing opinions***

The participants who had lived in NZ for more than two years said they were going to drop Chinese SNS. FG2 said:

I do not use Renren anymore. My Renren account was hacked. Renren is not safe. I think my personal information was revealed, in addition my friends on Renren may be exposed to online fraud. It is now popular for accounts to be hacked; the hacker can then trick friends of the user’s account to get money. Furthermore, my comments always were censored by the Renren’s internet regulators. Now, I am in NZ. Why do I have to use Chinese SNS anymore? Facebook is much more free than Weibo and Renren (FG2, in NZ more than two years).

Furthermore, I3 said:

More and more Chinese people are rich nowadays, which makes them also material. They like to spend lots of money on handbags and luxury cars. They then show their luxurious possessions online. I really do not like this kind of attitude. In my mind, a

car is just a kind of transportation. I feel there is a big gap between my old friends in China and me. So I do not update my status on Chinese SNS now. I feel there is no need. However, I would check my Facebook every day. I sometimes ask my friends' advice on information I need. For example, I had a project about how people from different countries like coffee. I asked my friends in US and Europe (I3, in NZ more than two years).

## **Summary of the key findings**

This section provides a summary of the main findings of this study. The findings will be addressed and discussed in relation to the relevant literature in the discussion chapter (chapter 5).

### ***Online freedom***

The main finding in this section is that Xiaonei and Weibo are the most popular SNS in China. Sharing information and status are the main functions of Chinese SNS. Most participants who had lived in NZ for more than two years justified that the Chinese government regulates the internet to stop the potential for political instability. However, they pointed out some disadvantages of the regulation. For example, there were no clear standards of internet censorship. In general internet users do not know what why the information would be censored or why.

By contrast, the members who had lived in NZ for less than two years were less aware

of China's situation and the reason for internet regulation. They just complained that there was less freedom online in China. They hoped the government would share political content as transparently as possible.

### ***Internet regulation***

The two groups were aware of Chinese government internet regulation, that is, that some information and websites would be censored. They could easily give examples during the interviews and conversations. FG1 said:

Sensitive words, such as 'the Communist Party', will be censored. It sounds amazing that 'Communist Party' is sensitive words. Negative information about the Chinese government is filtered on the internet. In fact, there a lot of people are dissatisfied with the government's activities (FG1, in NZ more than two years).

For the question about the real name register on SNS, the group members who had lived in NZ for more than two years knew that the real name system was impossible to apply. They stated that personal information may not be real and that there is no way to prove the users' real name. Even under the 'real name system' users can still register with fake information, such as name, school, and photos. Furthermore, one set of ID information can be registered on many accounts. The real purpose of the policy is to limit SNS users' express online that they aware the online regulators can easily get the

information who sent the sensitive messages. However, the members who had lived in NZ for less than two years supported the real name register system. They believed that users need to register on SNS using their real name because Renren was used to connect with old friends who are out of touch for a long time. Moreover, the real name system was used to reduce online crime, such as defrauding users of money. In their opinion, online sociability and safe are more important than online freedom.

For the question about the regulated internet, most participants who had lived in NZ for more than two years said the internet regulation bothered them. They could not get the news they wanted. However, one participant who lived in NZ for more than two years and most members who had lived in NZ for less than two years felt regulation was OK because they did not care about the news. In their opinion, there was no direct relation between the information and them.

### ***Censorship***

For the question about the experience of censorship, the two groups' experiences of whether their messages were censored were similar. Most participants expressed that they had the experience that their messages and articles had been censored on Chinese SNS. However, some participants stated that their messages were not censored online. They were not aware of censorship on Chinese SNS, and they did not send sensitive words.



The two groups' perspectives of whether they should stop sending sensitive information if they knew it might be censored were similar. Some participants said they would not send sensitive information and that they would not repost sensitive news about violence because it may hurt other people. In addition, the sensitive news would be censored very quickly. After that, the users who sent the news would not log into their account again. They did not seek trouble for themselves. Moreover, some users believed that their comments could not make any change to such a big issue. However, some participants said they would post sensitive information, even if they knew it might be censored. They would repost the information repeatedly.

### ***Behavioral response***

For the question about the usage of SNS influenced by the censorship, the members who had lived in NZ for more than two years ignored the Great Firewall in China; in contrast, they paid attention to avoid censorship of what they sent. They always edited their words to avoid censorship online. The sensitive words could be abbreviated to some letters, such as 'Communist Party of China' could be abbreviated to 'CPC'.

However, because the participants of the other group had lived outside of China for a shorter time, they were more interested in how to get information without it being blocked by the Great Firewall. They usually used software such as VNP (Virtual

Private Network), which creates a secure tunnel by encrypting data, to climb the wall and hide their real identity. They always visited YouTube, which is one of the most popular Western websites but banned in China.

For the question of the demands of SNS, most participants felt the Chinese SNS basically met their needs. They believed that SNS was not necessary in life. They only used basic features for communicating with their friends. Some interesting news and photos were enough on SNS. The political information was not necessary to show on SNS.

For the question of the differences between the Chinese and other Western SNS sites, most participants believed that Facebook was freer than Chinese SNS. It was fine to say anything on western SNS, even swear words would not be filtered on Facebook. Westerners feel self-expression is important; in contrast, self-control, which means control of one's feelings and behaviours, is an important value in Chinese culture. Furthermore, Chinese users could add any friends on Facebook; however, they could only add Chinese friends on Chinese SNS. In addition, Facebook does not require users to register their real name, while Chinese SNS needs real photos and names.

In addition, some participants, who had lived in NZ for more than two years, expressed that usages of SNS between Chinese users and Western users are different. Chinese

people are very interested in the information that the government hides. In contrast, in NZ most news is open, which makes people less concerned with issues of censorship.

For the question about changing opinions of using the Chinese SNS, the participants who had lived in NZ for more than two years said they were going to drop Chinese SNS. Some users' Renren accounts were hacked. They believed Renren was not safe. Furthermore, some participants felt a big emotion gap between their old friends in China and them. They did not update their status on Chinese SNS anymore. But they would check Facebook every day.

These key findings will be discussed fully in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 in the following discussion chapter.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Analysis

Internet users' behaviours in getting news have changed. Most participants get social news from friends' SNS. I6 said "I always open Renren after starting my computer. I will check the news on SNS when I feel bored" (I6, in NZ less than two years). A large number of people visit SNS first when they open the internet (Scotton and Hachten, 2010). After that, they browse information that friends have posted (Shanghai Journalism Review, 2010). The information in Weibo is going to be more transparent and direct (Wen, 2012) (as cited in Hewitt, 2012). Weibo users can immediately send the messages and images of what they saw. Through internet communication local people can easily debate sensitive issues. The traditional media can also join the discussion instantly (as cited in Hewitt, 2012).

The perceptions of internet users regarding internet regulation on SNS could be separated into two groups: those who oppose internet regulation on SNS, and those who support internet regulation on SNS. The internet users, who oppose the internet regulation on SNS, hoped the internet in China could be totally opened. Han (2012) states that:

This is sad for our nation and tragic for our country. If there is no freedom in criticism, then there is no meaning in praise. A country that does not allow normal criticism cannot become a powerful country. A powerful country does not live in fear (as cited in "What happens to free speech on Weibo after real name

registration”, para. 4).

No freedom of criticism is a main point to show the internet control. Many sensitive keywords are censored by the Great Firewall, which is used to control what users search for and post on SNS (Mozur, 2012). Furthermore, the real name system on SNS that registering the new accounts with users’ real identification information, was announced by Beijing officials in 2011. It can control the “irresponsible” speeches online (Wong, 2011). “Security officials can monitor what dissidents are up to” (Breaching the Great Firewall,” 2010, para. 7). Internet control by the government takes place in SNS, as well as, it would not be thrown away for any reason (Endeshaw, 2004). An internet user from Shenzhen, who usually bypasses the Great Firewall of China said “All I can say is, fake democracy is thinner than paper” (as cited in Yip, 2012). Although the government says that China is a democratic country, there is online information restricted by the government that internet users cannot express their feelings or get news without restraint. FG5 stated that he hated the Great Firewall, which has caused him to miss much information online. He could not visit Youtube and Facebook in China which means he is isolated from the outside world. He thought the Chinese government should decrease regulation of the internet so that everyone could get the information what they want and make comments on political topics, no matter whether they were positive or negative. It is the basic right of online speech. Also, the government should have to share political content as transparently as possible, for example, releasing all information that has been banned for several years, in order

to reduce the public's suspicions (FG5, in NZ less than two years). Likewise, FG7 said that:

In my mind, the government has hidden many things from the public. There is too much news about government corruption, for example, using taxpayers' money to travel abroad. I think the government should totally open their actions, such as clearly reporting government income and expenditure. However, in fact, the government does not explore their actions. I think they are afraid the investigation and criticisms from the public, so they need to control the information online (FG7, in NZ less than two years).

Some internet users would send the information even if they knew it may be censored. "China's internet users have managed to tweet and re-tweet some one million posts on the latest developments so far" (Yip, para. 4, 2012). Chinascope (2007) states Chinese internet users are playing a game of "cat and mouse" with their government. Chinese internet users have a method to express themselves, just like a water flow: "If you block one direction, it flows to other directions or overflows" (James, para. 5, 2009). FG3 said that in China people are very interested in the information that the government hides. They will use any measure and channel to get the information that they want (FG3, in NZ more than two years). Xiao (2010) (as cited in Ramzy, 2010), states that some Chinese mainland users bypass the Great Firewall and visit Twitter, and then repost the information on mainland blogs like Weibo. FG2 said that "I will repost them again and again even if I know it may be censored. I just want the public know the

truth”. These people just want to tell the truth what the government hides. However, they were not aware that why the government hides some truths and what may bring if the truths are spread to the public. Furthermore, FG5 said he will repost them sometimes. He has experienced material that he posted online – on conflicts between China and Korea – has been filtered by the government, even though the post was pro-Chinese government policy towards disputed territory on the North Korean border. However he simply posted it again, without consequence. He hopes she can call on other SNS users to firmly believe that (FG5, in NZ less than two years). There are many internet users like FG5 that want to call on more people to support the government. However, they had not considered why the government censored the information which appears to support the government. Sometimes, the government does not want to inflame territorial disputes, which may affect the diplomacy between the two countries.

These internet users were aware that Chinese government wants to create the world’s largest intranet in order to control public information. According to Liang (2011), the Chinese Communist Party regards the internet as being no different from any other form of media used to deliver the information. Chinese internet users may be discontented not only because the Western sites are forbidden, but also because of censorship on Chinese websites (Moskvitch, 2012). “Now Sina Weibo and Chinese social-media sites are the target of a new government crackdown” (Beech, 2011, p.50).

For example, Weibo has an “80 points” contract for the users to restrict online speech. Every account starts with 80 points. The users would gain more points by sending promotional activities; however, if they break the rules, such as spreading rumours, they would lose points. The users would receive a warning if their points fell below 60. Their accounts even would be cancelled if their account hit zero (“China's Weibo microblog introduces user contracts,” 2012). Likewise, I5 said that:

The users can level their Weibo account. I have applied to upgrade my Weibo title to ‘Weibo Daren’. The verification process took me two days and included all the information I have ever posted. I think the purpose of verification is to ensure that the user genuinely exists and to eliminate ‘terrorists’ who create accounts to post information against the government (I5, in NZ less than two years).

The purposes of the “80 points” and “Weibo Daren” is to encourage self-censorship among users. Under these measures, most users would care about what they send and consider whether the messages would reduce their points or loss the title of “Weibo Daren”, even the account being cancelled.

The internet users who participated in this study complained that the standards of the censorship in China were not clear. The Measure for Security Protection Administration of the International Networking of Computer Information Network in China, which is used to regulate the internet information, was spread by the State



Council of the People's Republic of China in 1994. It shows "no unit or individual shall use the international networking to produce, duplicate, search and disseminate the information that instigates the splitting up of the country and sabotage of national unity" (1997, p. 1). For most Chinese internet users it is not clear what is permitted and what is not (Cui, 2011). There is no explanation or example of what information would instigate the splitting up of the country and how can the public affect the national unity means and what information is forbidden online. Although there is a big education level gap between the people of the whole county, some of them can clearly distinguish between the truth and falsehood. Why they even cannot search the sensitive information? I5 has the experience of his messages being censored by Weibo regulators, such as posting comments on the fake baby milk powder scandal in. This kind of information is censored very quickly. After that, the reminder of 'the news was censored' was appeared in his home page of Weibo. However the Weibo internet regulator had never explained to the user why the news was censored. He thought the opinions he sent may show some negative social phenomena. But they are just some personal comments, which would not endanger the safe of China (I5, in NZ less than two years). The messages were censored without any reasons or explanation, which made the users upset and confused.

The users admired the free internet in Western countries. I5 said:

Compared with in China, we can easily get more information in NZ. I can freely visit Youtube, Facebook, Twitter and Google, and view some historical documentaries, which were banned on Chinese internet. Also, I can express my real feelings online in NZ, and both receive and send positive and negative information (I5, in NZ less than two years).

They are aware the free speech right is respected and protected by Western government. FG7 stated that “everyone should be able to make comments on political topics. This is a free speech right. Free speech should express people’s feelings, and help prevent the government from being lax in its duties”. FG7 believes that the restricted internet just covers the corruption within the government. Furthermore, business has been affected by the online control by the government (Endeshaw, 2004). The World Trade Organization has complained that Chinese internet censorship should be stopped as censorship obstructs world trade (Seidenberg, 2010). Facebook and Twitter, the top SNSs in the world, are still banned in China, which obviously obstructs world trade. Those SNSs may do not obey Chinese government, which means they neither want to sign the “Public Pledge of Self-Regulation and Professional Ethics for China Internet Industry” that agreeing to monitor the information nor self-censor their websites,

In order to express their discontent, some Weibo users shut down their accounts. They post messages such as “goodbye Weibo” and “time to move on to Twitter”, as well as calling on their friends to migrate to other SNS (“Beijing orders new controls on

'Weibo' microblogs", 2012). He (2012) expects that:

I expect Weibo to lose too many internet users after real name registration. No one is sure how to get through the registration process, and those in remote areas or overseas will probably not do so since it's too much trouble (as cited in "What happens to free speech on Weibo after real name registration", para. 4).

FG2 stated that he does not use Renren anymore. His comments always were censored by the Renren's internet regulators. However, now this participant is in NZ that he has not to use Chinese SNS anymore. Facebook is much freer than Weibo and Renren and is thus preferred (FG2, in NZ more than two years)

However, some research participants were prepared to tolerate government regulations. Both the companies and individuals self-censor online. Cannici (2009) points out Chinese companies which want to join China's online industry have to sign the "Public Pledge of Self-Regulation and Professional Ethics for China Internet Industry". In order to get a permit to do business online, these companies agree to monitor the information that users send in their websites and self-censor their information. I7 said:

I am concerned about what I send and will not send any extreme information online. I do not want to make any trouble for my country, which means I do not want that my messages be utilized by the 'terrorists' who want to instigate the splitting up of China and damage the peaceful and harmonious state (I7, in NZ less than two

years).

The Chinese SNS users felt they were helpless and had no choice except to observe government regulations. The participants feared government regulation. FG1 said “I will worry and feel depressed that the sensitive news I sent would be censored. The senders of negative news would be arrested in China. There are many examples of people who have posted pro-democracy articles online being imprisoned, such as Xiaobo Liu and Haibo Cao” (FG1, in NZ more than two years). The experiences of these dissidents have strongly affected the internet users’ attitudes of sending the sensitive information. According to the literature review, “now Sina Weibo and Chinese social-media sites are the target of a new government crackdown” (Beech, 2011, p.50). The SNSs can be so popular in China because they are not to challenge the censors (Scotton and Hachten, 2010). Message containing dissent and pro-democracy information would be immediately reported to the local police (Anti, 2012, as cited in Hewitt, 2012). These SNS may report to the government which SNS users are posting controversial and questionable material. Also, the Chinese government can easily track the IP address of senders from the SNS.

The participants, who have been living in NZ over two years, supported internet regulation on SNS. I5 said:

I can understand why the government has to use some methods to control online

speech....If the government does not control online speech, the 'terrorists' may use the internet to incite people to rise up against the government. However, it is difficult to balance the benefits to the people and the government (I5, in NZ less than two years).

It is a particular Chinese mentality around the level of freedom relating to "Junquanshenshou" and "Dayitong" of Confucian values which means all leaderships should follow the monarch. Throughout the long history, Confucian ideas were employed in the service of autocracy. Moreover, I2 said:

People who ask for freedom online do not know what real democratic freedom is. In my opinion, democratic freedom depends on a particular level of quality of the citizens. Some people send negative news about society, and then others repost the news again and again. They do not know the whole story, which makes the comments on the matter one-sided (I2, in NZ more than two years).

These kinds of people mentioned by I2 may be like I6, who just enrolled at the university and said "I believe what most people say online" (I6, in NZ less than two years). Tsui (2007) states that according to a survey in 2005 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the highest academic research organization in philosophy and social sciences in China, 36.8% of participants support controlling or managing the internet. Furthermore, 8% of participants believe the political content should be controlled. The real name system would not affect Weibo. The purpose of the system is asking users to take responsibility for their posts. In addition, there is no total online

freedom (Barnett, 2012). Even if in the democratic countries, such as the United States government would censor the pornography information online, Singaporean internet users have to register to access political and religious sites, the German government filters neo-Nazi websites (Lovelock, 1996). Xue (2005) says that “national governments formulate their internet and information policy based on their political regime, level of economic development, and cultural beliefs” (p. 247). Ma (2011) expresses that “the main reason given for the severity of the internet policy in China relates to the fact that the government has prioritized the protection of the state’s interest above all else” (p. 7). Huntington (1989) (as cited in Li, 2009) believes that when the political system is not mature, out of control political participants may cause more political instability (p. 33). The level of democratic freedom depends on the level of quality of citizens, such as the education level and state’s stability degree.

Moreover, Burke (2004) (as cited in Thussu, 2006) states that extremists who are willing to do illegal things in order to undermine the state unity are more likely to use the internet because it is a good platform to show their militant videos of violent actions, such as bombings and massacres. The various videos of the September 11 attacks that four passenger jets were hijacked by the Islamists militant group Al Qaeda and crashed the North and South towers of the World Trade Center in U.S., is an obvious example that shows Al Qaeda successes to use internet to show their violent actions. However, there is no chance for ‘terrorists’ to display their violent actions on internet

in China, because any video with sensitive information would be censored. For example, Tengfei Yuan, *the New York Times* called him “the most famous maverick teacher in China these days”, is a famous high school history teacher (Mu, 2010). His lectures which contain sensitive information such as the Cultural Revolution were full of wit and humour. His lectures videos had been clicked more than 1 million times in a month (Shi, 2009). Tengfei Yuan’s speech which contains his emotional opinions has less threat to the government. However, these videos were censored totally without any explanation recently. The Chinese government believes these videos may destabilise the state and threaten national stability, which looks simply that government propaganda used to suppress political dissent. Also, it shows the main difference between Western and Chinese political philosophy on political freedom.

Some Chinese internet consumers were greatly attracted by SNS. They felt that the Chinese SNS basically meets their demands, although they were aware that much information was filtered online (Sirhan, 2012) (as cited in Moskvitch, 2012). Although the young people are the main internet users, they have little interest in politics. According to a 2000 survey about their “heroes”, there is only one politician on the list of top 100. Most “heroes” were singers, artists (Scotton and Hachten, 2010). Scotton and Hachten further stated that “The purpose of SNS is to keep these students connected as they grow older and more affluent and thus even more attractive to advertisers”. Cannici (2009) states that Chinese internet users should not care about

being filtered on the internet. He further points out that “To them, the internet is not a revolutionary tool to plot political coups, but a place they can more easily communicate with other Chinese about daily concerns” (p. 8). Most participants said they knew their friends’ recent activities from SNS. Scotton and Hachten further explain that when the users are unhappy, they can leave messages on their SNS and wait for cheering them up by their friends. Chen and Haley (2011) report that Chinese white collar workers work long shifts under great pressure and take few weekends and holidays. The interactive games on Kaixin, such as Parking and Farmers are seen as a platform for these people to contact friends. FG7 said:

I have never thought about making comments on political topics on SNS. I usually get the political information from reports on TV and then discuss these with my family or friends. I think that SNS political discussions is not necessary (FG7, in NZ less than two years).

I5 stated that:

In order to show the strong, peaceful and stable side of China, the government wants to maintain a positive and harmonious image to the public. It has warned ‘terrorists’ and other countries that it is impossible to attack China anymore. It’s normal. I can understand the government (I5, in NZ less than two years).

These participants who refuse to debate politics online and support the regulation



because they are aware and understand why the government has to limit the information online. They would discuss politics with their friends and family in private instead of in public. “Most young Chinese are generally very defensive about anything they see as critical of their nation and even the government’s protective policies” (p. 43, Scotton and Hachten, 2010). It can be seen the state is successful in encouraging the use of internet communication rather than politics.

However, some users in this group complied with Chinese internet regulations in appearance but opposed them in their minds. Superficially, they observed the internet regulation but showed their feelings online in other ways. The Great Firewall cannot stop debate over censorship itself (Ramzy, 2010). “Government regulation can hardly catch up with the rapid development of the convergent technology” (Ang & Nadarajan, 1997) (as cited in Zhao, 2008). Chinese internet users have enough technical knowledge, guile and courage to share forbidden information (Anderson, 2009). They are finding inventive ways to spread information (Calingaert, 2010). Ordinary internet users can easily resist censorship mechanisms by through clever wordplay (Mozur, 2012). For example, users edit their posts so that sensitive words are abbreviated; and climb the Great Firewall by VPN (Virtual Private Network), which creates a secure tunnel by encrypting data. Scotton and Hachten (2010) point out that some internet users use “blank space” in their sensitive messages to avoid the censorship. FG2 explains that although the words “Bo Xilai” were all censored, the internet users

discussed his news by using “Gu Kailai” who is Bo Xilai’s wife.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This final chapter consists of three parts. The first part briefly summarises key issues from the discussion chapter and provides an overall conclusion. The second part discusses limitations of this research project, followed by suggestions for future research.

### Summary

This research project, a dissertation about internet regulation in China, explored possible perceptions among Chinese SNS users of popular SNS in China, such as Weibo and Renren. The aim was to identify how much participants know about the regulation of SNS in China, what Chinese internet users think about regulation of SNS in China, and the way Chinese internet users use various SNS in China. The purpose of this research project was to gain a deeper understanding of the level of knowledge internet users have about regulation of SNS in China; and how much and in what ways regulation affects the way SNS systems are used in China.

The unit of analysis of this research project was Chinese SNS users. The first group of participants was Unitec business exchange students who had been in NZ for less than two years. The second group of participants was Unitec students who had been living in NZ for more than two years and who knew from experience they could access more

information in NZ than in China. This research tested whether these groups had different perceptions of SNS and examined these differences.

The findings from this project allowed the conclusion that government regulation has an impact on internet users' perception of online freedom. Although much has already been written on the topic of internet regulation, online freedom, and the usage of SNS in China, a review of the literature revealed a need for more qualitative research. This research project aimed to fill this gap by increasing the amount of rich qualitative data on this topic. The findings provide information about what internet users think about regulation of SNS in China.

The research finds that with respect to free speech on the internet, perceptions of internet users surrounding internet regulation can be separated into two groups: the internet users who have been in NZ for less than two years oppose internet regulation on SNS, and some internet users who have been in NZ for more than two years support internet regulation on SNS. In the first group, the internet users hoped the internet in China could be totally opened. They were aware that the Chinese government wants to create the world's largest intranet in order to control public information. There is a big gap between Western and Chinese political philosophy in the political freedom. Also, they complained that the standards of censorship in China were not clear. In addition, they admired the free internet in Western countries.

However, some participants were prepared to tolerate government regulations. Both the companies and individuals would self-censor online. The internet users felt they were helpless and had no choice except observing government regulations. In contrast, the participants, who have been living in NZ over two years, supported the internet regulation in China. They could understand why the government had to control online speech, in order to avoid 'terrorists' using the internet to incite people to rise up against the government. However, some users in this group complied with Chinese internet regulations in appearance but opposed them in their minds.

The findings of internet users' usage of SNS influenced by government regulation was that some internet users are prepared to tolerate the government regulations. Most participants felt the function of SNS was to connect with their friends and have fun, and that availability of political information on SNS was not necessary. The Chinese SNS basically met their demands, although they were aware that much information was filtered online. The state is successful in encouraging the use of sociable communication rather than politics.

Internet users complied with Chinese internet regulations in appearance but opposed them in their minds. They observed the internet regulation online but showed their feelings online in other ways. On the surface, they accepted that information was censored and had never done any activity to oppose the government policy, such as

demonstrating for online freedom. However, Chinese internet users had enough technical knowledge, guile and courage to share forbidden information. Editing their posts and climbing the Great Firewall were the main tools for avoiding censorship. Chinese internet users were playing the game of “cat and mouse” with their government.

## **Limitations**

The following limitations of this study should be considered. Although this research project aimed to fill the gap by increasing the amount of rich qualitative data on this topic, there was a lack of negative comments in the reviewed literature by Chinese scholars in China. This might reflect the current situation in China, whereby research containing negative opinions regarding the Chinese government may be prohibited from publication in China.

The data collected by the focus groups and interviews were limited. Some participants were not good at expressing their opinions even though they were allowed to speak Chinese during the interviews and conversations. For instance, one participant in the focus group kept silent while others discussed openly around them.

There are a large number of factors that influence the internet regulation in China,

such as the economy. There was little discussion about the effect of economy on internet. It was an important reason why the government has to control the online information.

## **Areas for future research**

Various areas for further research can be identified in the context of the present research project that could contribute to an enhanced understanding of the impact of government regulation to the Chinese SNS users in China.

The findings of perception of free speech on the internet were different between the participants who have lived in NZ for more than two years and the participants who have lived in NZ for less than two years. The findings reflected a difference in awareness between the two groups; however, more study could be done into what caused the difference. This area is worth researching in the future.

Furthermore, the findings of participants' changing opinions in this research illustrated that some of them are going to drop Chinese SNS because their accounts were hacked and they had become estranged from old friends in China. These findings had less to do with internet regulation in China. Therefore, further investigation of participants' changing opinions could focus more on internet regulation by the government.

In addition, the economic forces shaping the internet for Chinese users can be researched in the further thesis. It can make the readers more aware the factors of internet control in Chinese SNS.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the findings from this research provide a deeper understanding of the level of knowledge internet users have about regulation of SNS in China, and how much and in what ways regulation affects the way SNS systems are used in China. However, a number of limitations were identified, including a lack of availability of negative comments by Chinese scholars in the literature, and the inability of some participants to express their opinions during the interviews/focus groups, even when they were allowed to speak Chinese. In the future, the researcher could investigate what causes differences in ideas and opinions on internet regulation by the government in China; as well the economic forces shaping the internet for Chinese users can be researched in the further thesis.



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## **APPENDICES**

**Appendix 1 -Information form (focus group)**

**Appendix 2 -Information form (interview)**

**Appendix 3 -Tentative questions (focus group)**

**Appendix 4 -Tentative questions (interview)**

**Appendix 5 -Focus group consent form**

**Appendix 6 -Interview consent form**

## **APPENDIX 1 –Information Form (Focus Group)**

**The impact of government regulation to the Chinese social networking systems**

**(SNS) users in China**

My name is Lijiao Ai. I am currently enrolled in the Master of International Communication programme at Unitec New Zealand. In order to complete the programme I am conducting a research project in the form of a dissertation. The research project is designed to answer the following research questions: What is the perception of free speech on the internet? What is the perception of Chinese SNS users about government regulation in China?

The aim of my project:

The aim of my research project is to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between direct communication and the impact on the development of trust in intercultural relationships.

I request your participation in the following way:

I would like to ask you to participate in a focus group interview and talk about:

- Your perceptions of direct communication in specific communication incidents,
- The impact of directness on your perception of another persons' trustworthiness, and
- Your perceptions and experiences in relation to the presented communication incidents.

The focus group will take about 60-90 minutes and will take place at the postgraduate meeting room of Unitec (building 180). I will, with your permission, audiotape the focus group interviews and transcribe them later. All features that could identify you will be removed and the tapes used will be erased once the transcription is done.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You can still withdraw from the project once the interview took place. Any withdrawals must be done within two weeks after the summary of the interview has been sent to you for approval.

Your name and information that may identify you will be kept completely confidential and anonymous. All information collected from you will be stored on a password protected computer at Unitec New Zealand for five years and can only be accessed by me and my supervisors.

Please contact me if you have any concerns about the project, via email (congcong\_1234567@hotmail.com) or phone (+64-21 2115656). You may also contact my supervisors at Unitec New Zealand. My principle supervisor is Dr. Vangelia Papoutsak, email papoutsaki@unitec.ac.nz or phone +64-9-815 4321 ext. 8746. My associate supervisors are Dr. Philip Cass, email cphilip@unitec.ac.nz or phone +64 9 815 4321 ext 8380 and Dr. Giles Dodson, email dgile@unitec.ac.nz or phone +64 9 815 4321 ext 8798.

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: (insert number here)

This study has been approved by the UNITEC Research Ethics Committee from (date) to (date). If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

## **APPENDIX 2 -Information Form (Interview)**

**The impact of government regulation to the Chinese social networking systems**

**(SNS) users in China**

My name is Lijiao Ai. I am currently enrolled in the Master of International Communication programme at Unitec New Zealand. In order to complete the programme I am conducting a research project in the form of a dissertation. The research project is designed to answer the following research questions: What is the perception of free speech on the internet? What is the perception of Chinese SNS users about government regulation in China?

The aim of my project:

The aim of my research project is to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between direct communication and the impact on the development of trust in intercultural relationships.

I request your participation in the following way:

I would like to ask you to participate in a focus group interview and talk about:

- Your perceptions of direct communication in specific communication incidents,
- The impact of directness on your perception of another persons' trustworthiness, and
- Your perceptions and experiences in relation to the presented communication incidents.

The focus group will take about 20-30 minutes and will take place at the postgraduate meeting room of Unitec (building 180). I will, with your permission, audiotape the focus group interviews and transcribe them later. All features that could identify you will be removed and the tapes used will be erased once the transcription is done.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You can still withdraw from the project once the interview took place. Any withdrawals must be done within two weeks after the summary of the interview has been sent to you for approval.

Your name and information that may identify you will be kept completely confidential and anonymous. All information collected from you will be stored on a password protected computer at Unitec New Zealand for five years and can only be accessed by me and my supervisors.

Please contact me if you have any concerns about the project, via email (congcong\_1234567@hotmail.com) or phone (+64-21 2115656). You may also contact my supervisors at Unitec New Zealand. My principle supervisor is Dr. Vangelia Papoutsak, email papoutsaki@unitec.ac.nz or phone +64-9-815 4321 ext. 8746. My associate supervisors are Dr. Philip Cass, email cphilip@unitec.ac.nz or phone +64 9 815 4321 ext 8380 and Dr. Giles Dodson, email dgile@unitec.ac.nz or phone +64 9 815 4321 ext 8798.

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: (insert number here)

This study has been approved by the UNITEC Research Ethics Committee from (date) to (date). If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

### **APPENDIX 3–Tentative Questions (focus group)**

<p><b>The impact of government regulation to the Chinese social networking systems (SNS) users in China</b></p>
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Tentative focus group questions:

1. Which social networking sites you usually use?
2. What you usually do on the SNS?
3. What is your perception of free speech on the internet?
4. Do you aware the internet regulation by the Chinese government?
5. Does the internet regulation bother you?
6. Do your messages be censored on Chinese SNS?
7. Would you send the sensitive information although you know it may be censored?
8. How is your usage of SNS influenced by the government regulation?
9. How do you incorporate mechanisms of government regulation into the use of SNS?
10. Do the Chinese SNS meet your demands?

## ***APPENDIX 4 - Tentative Questions (interview)***

<p><b>The impact of government regulation to the Chinese social networking systems (SNS) users in China</b></p>
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Tentative interview questions:

1. Which social networking sites you usually use?
2. What you usually do on the SNS?
3. What is your perception of free speech on the internet?
4. Do you aware the internet regulation by the Chinese government?
5. Does the internet regulation bother you?
6. Do your messages be censored on Chinese SNS?
7. Would you send the sensitive information although you know it may be censored?
8. How is your usage of SNS influenced by the government regulation?
9. How do you incorporate mechanisms of government regulation into the use of SNS?
10. Do the Chinese SNS meet your demands?
11. If you think the monitored internet bothers you, how do you resolve this problem?

## ***APPENDIX 5 –Focus Group Consent Form***

**The impact of government regulation to the Chinese social networking systems (SNS) users in China**

I have had the research project explained to me and I have read and understood the information sheet given to me.

I understand that I do not have to be part of this if I do not want to. I also understand that I can withdraw from the research project at any time during the focus group interview.

I understand that everything I say is confidential and will be made anonymous. None of the information I give will identify me and that the only persons who will know what I have said will be the researcher and her supervisors. I also understand that all the information that I give will be stored securely on a computer at Unitec New Zealand for a period of 5 years.

I understand that my interview will be audio taped and transcribed.

I understand that I can see the transcription of my interview before the interview analysis takes place.

I have had time to consider everything and I give my consent to be a part of this project.

I allow the researcher to audiotape my interview:                      Yes        
     No     

Participant Name: .....

Participant Signature: .....                      Date: .....

Project Researcher: .....                      Date: .....



## **APPENDIX 6 – Interview Consent Form**

**The impact of government regulation to the Chinese social networking  
systems (SNS) users in China**

I have had the research project explained to me and I have read and understood the information sheet given to me.

I understand that I do not have to be part of this if I do not want to. I also understand that I can withdraw from the research project at any time during the interview.

I understand that everything I say is confidential and will be made anonymous. None of the information I give will identify me and that the only persons who will know what I have said will be the researcher and her supervisors. I also understand that all the information that I give will be stored securely on a computer at Unitec New Zealand for a period of 5 years.

I understand that my interview will be audio taped and transcribed.

I understand that I can see the transcription of my interview before the interview analysis takes place.

I have had time to consider everything and I give my consent to be a part of this project.

I allow the researcher to audiotape my interview:

Yes

No

Participant Name: .....

Participant Signature: ..... Date: .....

Project Researcher: ..... Date: .....