

“OUR LIFEWORLD IS DIFFERENT”: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF GHANAIAN POST-GRADUATE STUDENTS STUDYING CHINESE LANGUAGE ONLINE

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Abstract

The hopes of travelling to and studying abroad were the main ambitions of some Ghanaian students prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. These students had previously received Chinese government scholarship to study in China but were utterly denied the opportunity due to the outbreak of the global health crisis. Nevertheless, they turned to online learning as an alternative means to pursue their academic goals, thereby keeping their dreams alive. While in their imagined presence, their experiences are worthy of exploration in Ghana and worth interrogating. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of Ghanaian post-graduate students who had to rethink in the pursuit of their career paths after an unsuccessful attempt at travelling abroad (China) to continue their learning. Adopting a phenomenological design, and underpinned by the theory of “social presence”, participants were selected and interviewed through phone calls. With prior consent, interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using thematic network analysis. Findings revealed that while the students were disappointed about their failed travel attempt, resorting to online learning offered them the flexibility and accessibility to combine learning with other opportunities while at home. Notwithstanding, the students encountered challenges related to technology, time management and social isolation during the learning period. The study concludes that, while online learning may be cost-effective for students, the majority of students will still choose the traditional face-to-face learning experience anytime the opportunity presents itself.

Keywords: Chinese Language, Postgraduate Studies, Lifeworld, Online Learning Experience, Social Presence Theory

Résumé

Voyager et étudier à l'étranger représentait une ambition majeure pour certains étudiants ghanéens avant l'apparition de la pandémie de Covid-19. Ces étudiants avaient obtenu des bourses du gouvernement chinois pour poursuivre leurs études en Chine, mais la crise sanitaire mondiale a brutalement interrompu leurs projets. Face à cette situation imprévue, ces étudiants se sont tournés vers l'apprentissage en ligne afin de continuer leur parcours académique et de maintenir vivants leurs espoirs professionnels. Bien que leur présence en Chine soit restée virtuelle, leurs expériences méritent d'être examinées dans le contexte ghanéen. Cette étude qualitative examine les vécus d'étudiants ghanéens de niveau universitaire supérieur qui ont dû réorienter leur projet de carrière après avoir échoué à se rendre à l'étranger pour étudier. En adoptant une approche phénoménologique et en s'appuyant sur la théorie de la « présence sociale », des entretiens téléphoniques ont été menés avec les participants, enregistrés avec leur consentement, puis transcrits et analysés selon une approche d'analyse thématique en réseau. Les résultats indiquent que, malgré la déception liée à l'échec du voyage, l'apprentissage en ligne leur a offert une certaine flexibilité et la possibilité de combiner études et autres activités depuis leur domicile. Toutefois, les étudiants ont rencontré des défis liés à la technologie, à la gestion du temps et à l'isolement social pendant la période d'apprentissage. L'étude conclut qu'en dépit de ses avantages économiques, la majorité des étudiants préféreront toujours l'apprentissage en présentiel dès que celui-ci devient possible.

Mots-clés : langue chinoise, études supérieures, monde vécu, expérience d'apprentissage en ligne, théorie de la présence sociale

1. Introduction

One of the giant steps toward China's political self-confidence was its public announcement of the establishment of the first Confucius Institute (CI) in Seoul, South Korea, in 2004 (Starr, 2009). This was seen as a means to promote Chinese language education abroad. Due to this effort, the Chinese language has been ranked by the United Nations as one of the top six official languages in the world. It is estimated that about 70 countries globally have incorporated the Chinese language into their national educational curriculum (Zhang, 2020). A further 4000 universities across the world have since mounted courses of various kinds in the Chinese language, with an estimated 25 million students from various colleges, said to be learning the language, whilst 200 million students are said to have learned the Chinese language in both public and private colleges across the globe (Nkrumah & Darko, 2022). Specifically, countries often referred to as "Super Powers" in global politics, such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Russia have incorporated the learning of the Chinese language into their national educational curriculum (Smith & Li, 2022; Xu, 2022; Che, 2022).

In Africa, the agenda of China to cooperate with the continent in the area of education started in 2005 in Beijing, at the Sino-African Education Ministers' Forum. The aftermath of this conference saw China reigniting its efforts by offering about 18,000 scholarships to students from fifty different African countries to be trained in different Chinese Universities across China (King, 2007). Other educational assistance projects were presented by China to about twenty-five African countries. Further, about six Confucius Institute are said to be operating in Africa, where over 8,000 students are said to be learning Chinese (King, 2007). This has

increased sharply to sixty Institutes operating in forty (40) countries across the continent (Xu et al., 2021). These efforts by China have led to literature reporting that there has been a surge in the number of people and institutions learning the Chinese language in Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa (Ma, 2022; Xu, 2022). To further promote the learning of the language, China has continued to beef up its globalization efforts through the deployment of about 530 teachers to Africa (King, 2007), and has supported about 60,000 teachers or instructors globally, with various skills, knowledge, and logistics to continue the promotion of the Chinese language (York et al., 2019).

Whilst Ghana is not left out in these globalization efforts at learning the Chinese language, it is said that the country (Ghana) only started Chinese language education when the University of Ghana first established and introduced the Chinese Language major, in the Department of Modern Languages in 2008. In 2013, the University of Ghana, in collaboration with the Zhejiang University of Technology established Ghana's first Confucius Institute on the University campus. Later in 2016, the University of Cape Coast in collaboration with the Hunan City University also established another Confucius Institute and started to run a Bachelor of Arts degree in Chinese language (Li, 2022). Further interest in learning the Chinese language in Ghana is noticed unofficially, among both private and public senior high schools that have started to offer Chinese language programs - even though this has not been part of the educational curriculum of the senior high schools in Ghana (GNA, 2016). It is estimated that in 2022, more than 8,000 Ghanaians were learning the Chinese language in six institutions across the country, with these institutions already graduating 47,000 learners (Li, 2022). Whilst these efforts at

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both international and local levels are envisaged to promote international relations and businesses among countries across the globe, especially with China, they also affirm the position of China in global economic and political affairs.

Meanwhile, scholarly literature (Zhong & Adegah, 2022) has reported that despite the growing interest across the globe in learning the Chinese language, some challenges have been identified to be common among students during the learning process, especially among Ghanaian students. According to these authors, the inadequacy of knowledge by many Ghanaian students on the morphemes or morphological units of Chinese words is hampering the smooth learning process of the language. The authors similarly acknowledged that such difficulties were not limited to only Ghanaian students, but common among other non-native Chinese language learners. They find it difficult to identify and read simple words in Chinese. Despite the above challenges in learning the Chinese language, especially among Ghanaian students, research revealed that students still aspire to achieve greater heights in learning the Chinese language, especially at the post-graduate level (Nkrumah & Darko, 2022). For instance, in 2018, an estimated 6,475 Ghanaian students were said to be studying the Chinese language in China, out of which 800 students were in Ph.D. programs (MFA¹- PRC). Despite the burgeoning statistics presented by scholars on the number of countries, institutions, and individuals showing interest in learning and promoting the Chinese language across the globe, one would have expected that similar attention would be paid to the enrolled students examining the lived experiences of students during the learning process, particularly among post-graduate students.

This issue is important especially among Ghanaian students who made a determined effort in studying the Chinese language in China but were involuntarily

forced to resort to online learning from their home country due to the outbreak of Covid-19. Demuyakor (2020) explored the experience of Ghanaian students who voluntarily studied the Chinese language online during the period of the coronavirus pandemic while in China and mentioned the challenges they encountered during the period, including poor access to the internet. Nsengimana et al., (2021) investigated online learning of Mathematics and Science education among post-graduate students in Rwanda during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of these studies emphasized students' readiness for online learning. Other researchers have also explored different domains of teaching and learning Chinese, during the Covid-19. For instance, studies by Wulanjani and Indriani (2021), Das et al. (2020), Habidin et al. (2021), and Suci et al. (2021) examined teaching experiences and the challenges associated with implementing online education. In all these cases, students had voluntarily opted to study the Chinese language online without any form of coercion. However, they had not received any scholarship package to travel to China for academic purposes, despite being disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Beyond these studies, little is known among Ghanaian postgraduate students in terms of their lived experiences studying the language online. Some had their hopes dashed after receiving the Chinese government scholarship to travel to China for further studies, but were utterly disappointed due to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. They had to continue their studies through online while in their home countries. The absence of research on the experiences of this unique group of students—who had imagined studying in China only to end up studying from their homes—has important implications for policy, theory, and practice. It raises several critical questions: How were their scholarship packages, previously designed to support them, handled after their travel plans were disrupted? Were they paid in full or denied? What were their coping

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strategies while attending lectures online, completing assignments, and writing exams? What other challenges were faced by these students during this period of uncertainty?

These and many other questions remain underexplored. Thus, this study aims to fill the knowledge gap, to bring to the fore the experiences of these unique Ghanaian students who out of no fault of theirs, had to resort to pursuing the Chinese language online, and the challenges they encounter during their studies. The study contributes to knowledge through the experiences on the ways to improve the learning of the Chinese language among Ghanaian students and universities. The findings of this study will be valuable to policymakers and education stakeholders, particularly in shaping initiatives that promote and enhance Chinese language education in both public and private universities in Ghana and beyond.

2. Theoretical Underpinning: The Social Presence Theory

The underlying theory for this study is the “social presence theory”. This theory is attributed to John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie in 1976. The theory was originally introduced in their paper titled "The Social Psychology of Telecommunications" published in the journal *Wiley InterScience*. The theory explains how individuals perceive and experience a sense of being "present" in a mediated communication environment, particularly in situations where face-to-face interaction is absent. For instance, how Ghanaian students who should have been studying the Chinese language in China, had to resort to the online mode of learning due to Covid-19 outbreak, while in Ghana, perceived their presence (in China) without necessarily visiting their universities of study in China.

The authors define social presence as "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the

consequent salience of the interpersonal relationship" (Short et al., 1976). In other words, it refers to the extent to which individuals perceive the presence of others as real and meaningful in a communication medium. Students engaged in online learning often perceived their colleagues and teachers from other countries across the globe as real even when they are not physically present. According to the theory, social presence is influenced by various communication factors, including the quality and immediacy of feedback, the use of personalization and natural language, and the ability to express emotions and nonverbal cues. These factors affect individuals' perceptions of the social context and their sense of connectedness with others. Thus, the absence of students meeting face-to-face to interact with peers and instructors, share their emotions with others through seeking help on class assignments, social networking, and to commonly resolve their differences during the course of their studies affects their experiences. Social presence is important for online learning because it can influence students' engagement, motivation, and satisfaction with the learning experience. When students feel a sense of social presence, they are more likely to actively participate, collaborate with peers, and engage in meaningful interactions. This, in turn, can enhance their learning outcomes and overall experience in the online learning environment. The theory of social presence has been applied to various contexts where mediated communication is involved. It has found particular relevance in the field of online learning and computer-mediated communication, hence its adoption for this study.

3. Literature Review

Literature abounds on the reasons or motivations for the study of foreign languages, especially the Chinese language. A study conducted by Wen (2011) and Mohammed and Wei (2017) revealed varied reasons for students studying the Chinese language including economic and educational opportunities that come

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with the learning of the language. While believing that the acquisition of the Chinese language will enhance the prospect of getting jobs, students are also motivated by the chances that learning the Chinese language will create new business opportunities in a global environment. This will provide students with a competitive advantage over those who have no knowledge of the language within the job market, especially as China continues to be a leading bloc and an emerging global economic power. As a comparative study between heritage and non-heritage learners, the author adds that a positive learner attitude was a key motivation for the learning of any foreign language. The study, however, revealed that heritage learners in particular, especially those with Chinese bilingualism may be motivated by what is described as uncontrollable external factors, and the failure of internal factors.

Beyond external motivations for learning the Chinese language, Comanaru and Noels (2009) revealed that students are sometimes intrinsically motivated to learn the Chinese language. This means that they are driven by their interest in the subject matter, and therefore tend to have better academic performance and overall satisfaction with their learning experience. Thus, these intrinsic and extrinsic motivations call for further investigations to unearth the general experiences of postgraduate students as they navigate the realm of knowledge acquisition at the very highest level. While these studies focused on the internal and external motivations for learning a foreign language, particularly the Chinese language, they have failed to explore why students would prefer to study this language online, despite the difficulty often associated with such a mode of learning languages.

However, the works by Ilgaz and Gulbahar (2017) and Luo et al., (2011) acknowledged why students will resort to online learning instead. In their study of why students choose online learning, Luo et al., disclosed that there was a close relationship between

students' chronotype and their choice of learning period for online classes. Further, Wen (2011) mentioned the issue of flexibility and convenience as key motivations for the study of the Chinese language online by students. It is stated that studying the Chinese language online allows students to balance their academic and personal commitments. This further enables students to access high-quality teaching resources from other institutions in China.

Additionally, the need to enhance students' digital literacy, skills, and knowledge has been a motivation for the learning of the Chinese language online, especially in this era of digital technology. While the author is commended for such a contribution to the literature on the motivations for learning the Chinese language online, the study similarly failed to indicate how external shocks like Covid-19 pandemic could force students against their wish to shift or transition to the learning of the Chinese language online. Despite these motivational drives to learning the Chinese language, postgraduate students are challenged to learn the language especially online. These challenges include cultural barriers, emotional difficulties and other related obstacles.

Despite the above internal and external motivations for learning the Chinese language online, a study by Gao (2020) on the perceptions of Australian students on the challenges of learning Chinese characters during online studies established that the perceived experiences on the challenges of students who study Chinese language and characters online were utterly different from those who engaged in face-to-face mode of learning. Technological and physical barriers such as the internet and space were found to be the key challenges facing learners engaged in online learning. Also, Alshammari (2020) on the study of the Chinese language in Saudi Arabia revealed that students often face cultural shocks, language barriers, and difficulty in adapting to the Chinese academic system, especially when they have not had the opportunity to visit China during the

period of their undergraduate studies. Such students experienced difficulties in understanding the Chinese culture, customs, and traditions, which are different from theirs. Similarly, they faced difficulty in comprehending the Chinese accent, leading to miscommunication and misunderstanding. As a result, they feel isolated and disoriented, making it challenging for them to perform well academically.

Beyond these, students studying Chinese language online often faced social and emotional challenges during the period of their learning (Gao, 2020; Hu, 2010). The authors revealed that students pursuing online academic learning often experienced the feelings of loneliness, and isolation due to the absence of face-to-face interaction with tutors and course mates. This lack of social support has the tendency of affecting their academic performance, and reducing their interest in further pursuit of the language. Relatedly, students also faced emotional challenges due to the pressure to succeed in a highly competitive academic environment, which can lead to stress and anxiety (Freeman et al., 2020).

The challenge of technology to learning online courses cannot be underestimated. It is said that the advancement in technology has posed a lot of challenges to individuals, groups and institutions in trying to keep abreast with time. Reliable access to the internet has been mentioned as a critical challenge to engaging in any online learning programme. This is particularly true for most third-world countries, especially in Africa. Thus, some African students, who resort to pursuing higher academic knowledge through online, often fail to complete their programme and perform poorly due to poor internet accessibility and quality.

Closely related to this is the challenge of pedagogical shift that comes with online learning. It is indicated that educators often face the challenge of adapting to the appropriate teaching methods to online environment (Hodges et al., 2020). This sometimes leads to poor learning outcomes and thereby affecting

the knowledge and skills base of the learners. Yet, students' engagement and motivation in online courses with tutors in a virtual classroom has proven to be a serious challenge, and thus affecting learning outcomes (Freeman et al., 2020). While the challenges of postgraduate students studying online courses are unavoidable, there is the need for more innovative strategies to be in place to enhance the learning experiences of this cohort of students going into the future.

Alshammari (2020) suggests the need for effective teaching and learning strategies to be adopted by instructors to enhance learning outcomes. The author suggests that the pedagogy of foreign language should be built around the needs of learners as this could wet their appetite in learning the language. Providing students with relevant learning resources such as textbooks, audio and video materials, as well as online dictionaries could go a long way to enhancing such mode of learning, especially in the study of foreign languages like Chinese. Also, the use of instructional technology, such as video conferencing, instant messaging, and online discussion fora, could further enhance interaction between teachers and students, and thereby reducing the burden on students over the challenges faced during online teaching and learning. Sun (2011) suggests that tutors or instructors should be properly trained in online pedagogy to ensure that they are efficiently equipped to handle online courses effectively.

4. Methods

The aim of the study was to understand the experiences of a group of students who had received the Chinese government scholarship in the 2019/2020 academic year to study in China, but were denied this opportunity due to the outbreak of the corona virus pandemic. Based on this objective, the study aligned itself with the qualitative research methodology. Participants were hard to find as they were scattered across various regions of the country.

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However, the researchers were fortunate to have had contact with one of such students who had agreed to assist us in getting access to other potential participants.

Through snow-balling, other participants were reached via telephone calls after a self-introduction was done by the first respondent to other colleagues. Participants' telephone numbers were provided to the researchers through the first participants, and referrals were made to other potential participants. Thus, interview schedules were conducted through phone calls whilst permission was sought from participants to record the conversation for further data processing. This allowed the researchers to explore in-depth the experiences of the participants. The interviews allowed for in-depth understanding and exploration of individual observations and perspectives over a period of time (Neuman, 2014). Due to the uniqueness of these group of participants, they were purposively selected (Christensen et al., 2015).

In all, twelve (12) participants (post-graduate students) took part in the in-depth interview during the study. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, manually coded and themes generated, regrouped and analyzed through thematic networks analysis. All participants spoke the English language during the interview. Ethically, participants were made aware that participation was voluntary and that at any period during the study they could quit if they find the study against their own values or privacy. Even though this ethical principle was made known

to participants, there was no issue of any participant quitting during the period of the data collection.

5. Findings and Discussion

Gaining a scholarship to pursue higher learning abroad is often seen as welcoming news to many young academics. This is particularly true for those who are offered full scholarship opportunities to study for their post-graduate programmes. This study was conducted among participants (post-graduate students) who had gained admission for further studies in China, and were at various levels of pursuit of their academic programmes. These students had initially gained full scholarships to various universities in China to pursue various master's degrees in Chinese. Unfortunately, they were denied the opportunities of visiting China for their knowledge upgrading due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. The experiences of this category of respondents are unique, hence necessitating an investigation.

Unlike other participants from different research who voluntarily chose to study various programmes through online, our participants were unique in the sense that they were compelled by a health crisis to resort to online study away from their intended missions. Table 1 gives a detailed profile of the various universities and programmes participants had scholarships to study, but were utterly disrupted by the outbreak of Covid-19, and therefore dashed their hopes of enjoying the scholarship package and the opportunity to visit China.

Table 1: Profile of participants' programme of study

Number of students	Age range	Year of enrolment to completion	Name of university	Programme of study
1	29	2021-2023	Yunnan Normal university	Masters of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (MTCSOL)
3	26-28	2020-2023	Sichuan university	Masters in International Chinese language Education (MICLE)
4	27- 29	2022-2024	Capital Normal University	MTCSOL

2	28-29	2021-2023	Yunnan Normal university	MTC SOL
1	28	2022-2024	Beijing Foreign Studies University	MICLE
1	28	2021-2023	Capital Normal University	MICLE

Data gathered revealed that all our participants had previously travelled to China during their undergraduate study through government scholarship. They were awarded scholarships for one academic year to study in China, before coming back to continue in Ghana. This initial travel opportunity had prepared them well enough in terms of experience for the task ahead. Subsequently, during their postgraduate period they were fortunate to have had a similar scholarship opportunity, but were unfortunately denied this due to the outbreak of Covid-19. On their age range, the data revealed that all participants were in their late twenties, signalling a youthful age group and therefore the exuberance to pursue higher knowledge, especially in a foreign language.

Our findings further revealed that two major post-graduate programmes were undertaken by our participants online: Masters in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages and Master's in International Chinese Language Education, across four different universities in China. Indeed, the desire or motivation to pursue the Chinese language even at the highest level of knowledge acquisition by Ghanaian post-graduate students could be explained or attributed to various factors. The economic, social, political and cultural opportunities that the study of Chinese language offers to learners in a globalizing environment cannot be underestimated. According to Wen (2011) and Mohammed and Wei (2017), while believing that the acquisition of the Chinese language will enhance the prospects of students finding jobs after the completion of their various courses of study, it is also true that the acquisition of such knowledge by students will create new business opportunities in a globalizing environment. This has the propensity of providing the students with a competitive advantage over those who have not had the opportunity to learn

the language within the job market, especially as China continues to be a leading bloc as an emerging global economic power. The desire for students to experience at first-hand the ecological and geographical diversity of China was noticed to be a motivation for our participants in accepting to pursue the Chinese language. While the prospects of learning the Chinese language could be attributed to opportunities over job acquisition, this can be described as external motivations. Comanaru, and Noels (2009) revealed that intrinsic motivation could also influence students to pursue higher education in the Chinese language. The author posits that self-driven interests in a subject matter could influence students to pursue a course or subject at a higher level.

Exploring the Alternative

While internal and external factors could account for the learning of Chinese language by post-graduate students, the question is: why would students choose online mode of study, especially in the learning of a language? In response to this question, our findings revealed that participants resorted to learning the Chinese language through online, not out of their choice but due to the disruption by Covid-19. Indeed, participants expressed their disappointment over their inability to travel to China after securing various packages of scholarships from the Chinese government. Majority of our participants saw the online learning of languages, especially Chinese, as inappropriate. Yet, they had no alternative than to accept such a reality due to the corona pandemic. Giving another opportunity, participants would prefer the traditional face-to-face classroom mode of learning to online. A participant said:

I did not choose to do the course online. I basically had no choice because of Covid-19.

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When I was applying, it was with the hope that the Covid-19 situation in China will improve so that we will be allowed to go to China to study in the traditional classroom setting. Unfortunately, that did not happen. But I could not allow the opportunity to slip away. So, I decided to continue online. I had no choice [PW 1].

Another participant maintained that:

My decision to study the Chinese language online wasn't something I decided or opted for by choice. But because of Covid-19, so I had no option than to do it online. You know, if you are studying a language, you need the language environment, and travelling to China would have been the best environment in learning the language. Unfortunately, that did not happen. I was a bit disappointed in losing the opportunity to travelling to China in-person. I will always prefer the face-to-face over the online anytime [PW 2].

Indeed, the study of languages of any kind requires a suitable environment for a smooth learning process. While our participants had expressed their desire for the traditional classroom mode of learning, away from online, a study by Nsengimana et al., (2021) revealed that, there are many opportunities associated with studying other courses online. In their study of post-graduate students on language of instruction, Mathematics and Science education in Rwanda, the authors revealed that through online learning, participants acquire some skills in the use of technology, enhance communication and listening skills, develop critical thinking and research skills. Again, the authors maintained that with Covid-19, postgraduate students who resorted to online learning were offered both computers and financial assistance to enable their pursuit of their programmes. Comanaru and Noels (2009) revealed that students are sometimes intrinsically motivated to learn the Chinese language. Whilst intrinsic motivation could be a key driving force for the learning of foreign language like Chinese, our findings reveal opposite.

Indeed, external motivation like stipend and other related allowance during a study period was key in determining the pursuit of Chinese language by Ghanaian postgraduate students.

Also, the findings of Nsengimana et al., (2021) that students who studied online during the period of Covid-19 were provided computers contradict the case of the Ghanaian students studying the Chinese language online during the period of Covid-19. They neither had any financial assistance nor offered any computers during the period of their study. What this also means is that many Ghanaian students who studied online during the period of the Covid-19 were more likely to encounter technological challenges compared to their counterparts from Rwanda. Thus, Ghanaian post-graduate students studying the Chinese language online were more likely to spend more on technology, including buying their own computers, internet bundle, among others. Social advice, flexibility and costs were similarly mentioned as some of the reasons why Ghanaian postgraduate students resorted to online after a failed attempt to travel to China. Many participants had expressed the mixed feeling they initially encountered when they realized that travelling to China was not possible. Some of these students had thought of giving up on the entire programme and waiting till the pandemic was over. However, advice from colleague students and friends who had travelled to China previously for further studies influenced most of them to take advantage of the opportunity, and not to give up on their dreams. Indeed, the experiences acquired by participants during their undergraduate studies was enough a solace to motivate them to continue with the online mode of study. What mattered most to the students was the acquisition of the certificate in the Chinese language and their ability to get a well-paid job afterwards. A participant reiterates that:

At a point I wanted to stop. But some of the advice I had from our past seniors and some friends in China, I said, okay, let me give it a try.

I just made up my mind that I need this certificate. Maybe you are able to get the certificate; you will be able to get a job with it. So that was the main reason why I remained focused on the online [PW 5].

Another participant maintained that

The online mode of study is quite flexible as compared to the traditional classroom setting. For instance, you don't have to wake up and dress to class. You can even be in bed and still participate in an online lesson. It is very flexible. You can also combine other household chores with the online classes [PW 8]

The idea of flexibility with regard to online learning has been explained in literature by other researchers. Comanaru and Noels (2009) as well as Mohammed and Wei (2017) argue that students are often drawn to online learning primarily because of its flexibility and convenience. According to these authors, studying Chinese language online allows students to balance their academic and personal commitments. This further enables students to access high-quality teaching resources from other institutions abroad, which may not have been available and accessible to them at their countries of origin.

Beyond the flexibility associated with learning through online, participants also stated the cost-effective nature of the online study compared to the traditional classroom setting as an additional motivation to maintaining their desire for the online mode of learning, since they had no choice any longer at the time. Indeed, while the participants were not able to travel to China to continue their study, costs regarding travels, reading materials and other expenses associated with travelling abroad are avoided. They are able to channel such funds into other expenses like purchasing data bundle for internet connection. A participant said:

In fact, I needed the Master's degree certificate very badly, and therefore didn't want to allow the opportunity goes. Yes, the desire to have a Master's degree as early as possible. I badly

wanted to have a Master's degree. And I thought even if I could go to any other University, the cost will be too much. The online was a relatively cheaper option, because I didn't have to pay for anything apart from bundle to stay online [PW 10].

While they avoided cost and travel expenses, participants had always maintained their feelings as though they were in China. Some participants mentioned how they kept imagining as if they were living in China, especially any time they had a lesson online and continue to interact with their colleagues and instructors across the globe.

Sometimes while on a lecture with our teachers and colleagues, it often occurs to me as if I was in China. You know, I went to China for one academic year during my undergraduate studies. So, this experience sometimes occurs to me while I am in lecture online. But I must admit that, this online experience can't be compared to what we saw when we went to China the past years [PW 12].

These imaginations of being present in China, while in Ghana by the study participants could best be illustrated by the social presence theory by John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie of 1976. The theory explains how individuals perceive and experience a sense of being "present" in mediated communication environments, particularly in situations where face-to-face interaction is absent. In other words, the extent to which individuals perceive the presence of others as real and meaningful in a communication medium, illustrate the social presence theory. The imaginations and perceptions by post-graduate students on their interaction with tutors and colleagues online from China and other parts of the world, as if they were in China physically, drums home the importance of this theory to the study. Indeed, the theory maintains that various communication factors influence the way people imagine or perceive their presence in a mediated communication like online study. Some of these

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factors include the quality and immediacy of feedback, the use of personalization and natural language, and the ability to express emotions and nonverbal cues. These factors, the authors reiterate, affect individuals' perceptions of the social context and their sense of connectedness with others. Thus, the absence of students meeting face-to-face to interact with peers and instructors, share their emotions with others through seeking help on class assignments, social networking, and to commonly resolve their differences during the course of their studies, affect their experiences.

Time Zone Difference as a Study Challenge

One of the critical challenges of online learning by students is the issue of time management (Chao, 2019). Unlike a structured learning environment like the traditional classroom, online mode of learning requires that students take responsibility of their learning environment. Several challenges were identified by participants with regard to studying their programme in Chinese language online while in Ghana. Time zone difference between China and Ghana, poor network connection, high cost of internet bundle, lack of proper study environment, social isolation from peers and tutors, and the stress of combining work with studies were some challenges identified.

As stated before, there is an 8-hour time difference between Ghana and China. Meaning, China is 8 hours ahead of Ghana. This difference in time has serious implications for students' learning outcomes, especially through online (Demuyakor, 2020). This is especially true, when all participants are engaged in the learning of a foreign language. The inconvenience of managing one's sleep time with waking up to join lectures online at mid night has implications for the health of individual students. This is particularly true as the study data revealed that majority of participants were either part-time workers with some Chinese companies in Ghana or engaged in other private activities for a living. The

combination of the stress from work and that of staying awake till night to join lessons was described as burdensome and stressful. According to Chao (2019), students engaged in asynchronous courses may find it difficult participating in real-time discussion with colleagues and teachers, and thus hindering their learning experiences. Nevertheless, these students never gave up in their efforts to ensuring that they obtain the needed certificates from their programme of study. A participant summarily reechoed these challenges and said:

One is the time difference. Second is the lack of language environment. You have to have people around you to practice the language. The third one is network problems. You know in Ghana our network is very bad. And also cost of buying data. If you are not financially stable or you do not have the financial muscle to take care of yourself, it will be first difficult [PW 2].

Other participants said:

Time difference! Having classes at midnight was bad for me. Because I am like the early bird, I prefer doing everything in the morning till the night. But to wake up from your sleep in the night to join a class was difficult for me. Sometimes I can have a bad day, and that will affect my mood to answer questions or talk in class at night. I think the time difference really affected me in class [PW 1].

I think the first challenge will be due to the time difference between the 2 countries. That is China and Ghana. With China being 8 hours ahead of Ghana, most of the classes were at the Ghana midnight time, at 12 am or more. And so, we used to be sleeping at that time. So, it wasn't easy to be awake at that time. Sometimes it is very difficult to stay awake till that time to have the online class. So that was one major challenge [PW 4].

It is imperative to state that, while online learning either involves a synchronous or asynchronous mode of interaction between the teacher and student at a scheduled time (Nsengimana, 2021), some other

subjects like the learning of languages, especially the Chinese language, triumph better in a synchronous form particularly for the sake of practice. Learning other people's language is best enhanced when it is carried out in the environment or community of the native speakers. Learners are able to interact with varied people in and around their environment to improve their proficiencies. However, our study data revealed that the only platform for participants to practice the Chinese language was either interaction with teachers online, or with other technological tools like online apps. This limited the level of social interaction between and among participants with their colleagues, and tutors as well. This is particularly worrisome for post-graduate students who are trained to come out to also impart knowledge by teaching with non-native speakers of the language. While this is critical, (Benlounissi, 2020 as cited in Nsengimana, 2021) maintained that no matter how an online learning is organized, it cannot replace the physical presence of both the teacher and student, since the latter would have created a human bond among the students to enable them feel confident and to build their knowledge. Hudson (2009, also cited in Nsengimana, 2021) reiterate that social interactions during the course of learning a language appeared to be a successful way forward for developing and enhancing communicative competence. This is how a participant narrated it:

I honestly realized that communication between teachers and students, even among us as students was at the lowest. I can't even remember the last time I had a good conversation with a class mate. That kind of interaction is not there. And building that classmate relationship was just out... With that, you are not even seeing their facial expressions or their gestures. These facial expressions and gestures help you to understand when you don't get a specific thing. But sometimes you are even deprived of that all these. In fact, the best way to learn a language is to engage in regular interaction with the natives.

Unfortunately, with the online, you are speaking to people like a "ghost". They only hear your voice, but can't see you [PW, 5].

While the internet is the driving force for online learning, it is important that students who resort to learning online are well connected to and have access to this facility. Unfortunately, our participants stated poor internet connectivity as a key obstacle during their online study. This result corroborates with a study by Demuyakor (2020) survey on the perceptions of Ghanaian students studying online in China during the period of the Covid-19. According to Demuyakor, during the period of the Covid-19, Ghanaian students who were still in China complained of the slow nature of the internet which often disrupted their online learning process. Again, they complained of the high cost of internet bundles. A participant during our study similarly stated:

The online consume a lot of data. In a day, you can use like ten gigabytes of data. It is expensive. I used MTN, because that's the only network that can work in my house. I tried Vodafone but it couldn't. That's one major issue with my online learning [PW 1].

Another participant said:

Initially, I tried using Airtel, the network wasn't ok. Then I switched to MTN and that seemed better. But I was purchasing the data in bits, but with time I realized that buying in bulk was better. So, I went for the Ghc 399 package for 219GB with MTN. So, I realized that was a better way.

Our findings corroborate with an earlier study that maintained that the advancement in technology has posed a lot of challenges to individuals, groups and institutions to be abreast with time. Reliable access to internet has been mentioned as a critical challenge to engaging in any online learning programme. This is particularly true for most third world countries, especially in Africa. Thus, some African students, who resort to pursuing higher academic knowledge through online learning, often failed to complete their

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programmes or tend to perform poorly due to poor internet accessibility and quality.

Coping with Early Sleep, Game Time and Phone Use

The experiences of participants with regard to coping with the online studies were varied. Many of our participants mentioned the issue of time difference (8 hours) between Ghana and China as a key experience. This had taught them time management techniques regarding their studies. To cope with attending lectures online, they were strategic regarding time management. One of the adaptive strategies was in relation to when to sleep. Indeed, participants mentioned that most of their lectures came very late in the night in the case of Ghana's time. For instance, they were instances where they attended lectures at 12:00- 2:00 am in Ghana, where China would have been between 8:00- 10:00am. This caused a lot of inconveniences regarding sleeping and learning. However, to overcome the stress they resorted to either getting enough sleep during the daytime or have an early sleep during the night to enable them wake up later. Some participants also stayed awake, engaged with either playing games with their colleagues or on their phones till the time of the lecture in the night. A participant said:

During the course work period, I made sure to have much sleep during the day. Even when I cannot get enough sleep during the day, I made sure to go to bed a bit early. Because I realized that the disruption in my sleep was also stressful and annoying. I realized I was being stressed up. So, I told myself I have to sleep well during the day so that when I wake up in the middle of the night, I will stay awake throughout [PW, 12].

...Sometimes too on a normal day, you can just stay awake till 12 am playing games on your own or chatting with friends online. Do you get me? [Asking the interviewer]. So, I just strategized my plan and waking up at dawn to study. But there

were days that I was not able to do that because of work [PW, 2].

The availability of smart phones with students can facilitate or undermine their studies. Smartphones can be an important source of nuisance to its users through the engagement on social media, messaging apps, games, constant notifications and other entertainment sources, serving as a tool to distraction. This has the potential of reducing productivity or overall output of students (Kacetl & Klimova, 2019). Our findings revealed that while participants were aware of the distractive nature of these tools during their studies, they had either learned to avoid its usage completely or minimize the use of such smartphones during the period of their studies. This was alluded to by one of our participants who said:

I managed to limit my distractions like staying off the phone when in class. Sometimes I want to check the meaning of something (word) on the dictionary on my phone, then a message pops up, I try to view the message and get lose in looking at something else. So, while in class, I will put my phone on "Do Not Disturb" so that when I am even tempted to look at the definition of something or check an answer, I am not tempted to go to those distractive messages [PW, 11].

Related to the above coping strategy by post-graduate students is the case where students often resort to learning from other technology tools, as a means to augmenting their studies. Our data revealed that beyond the online lessons, students also downloaded some Chinese learning apps from the internet to engage themselves with learning. Most of these tools they stated were recommended by their tutors. They were often used when they encountered challenges during an online lesson. A participant said:

So, there's this Chinese learning app, called "Dualingo". Yes, that is right. So, it speaks up well. So, although I am not having natural Chinese people around having discussions, it gives you that learning, additional learning tool. So, we are

not just focusing on what is being provided in class, but by the extra learning outside [PW, 7].

Another participant reiterated that whenever they encountered a challenge during a lecture online, they tended to notify the teacher and resort to watching related videos of the on-going lessons.

So, once that happens, I'd have to send a message to the teacher. Because when a teacher realizes that you are not part of the class again, it is like you have run away. So first of all, I have to notify them of what is going on. Sometime too, when it happens that way I start to watch a certain video on "Xuexitong". This was a video of a case analysis of something that had happened in class. So, the teacher quickly informed me to just watch that second video. So, I could watch the video and by the time I was back, I went back to the classroom for the classroom discussion [PW, 10].

The above was some of the few experiences shared by post-graduate students pursuing the Chinese language via online from Ghana.

Mode of Assessment: Clock-in Clock-out

The mode of assessing online learners has implications for the overall outcome of the learning process. It also influences the quality of knowledge of the learner. Our participants revealed that different methods of assessment were employed by their instructors in evaluating their studies online. These assessments ranged between class attendance and participation, presentation, group discussions to end of semester examination. A participant said:

Basically, they put in systems for assessment. One was much like attendance on "Xuexitong", that Chinese app. It allows just 5 minutes time space to sign in and check out. For that one it was strict...there was classroom participation assessment as well. Teachers were telling us right from the beginning of the class that if you don't participate in the class, you will lose 5% to 10% out of the marks. Some teachers also uploaded videos on Xuexitong for us to watch. So depending

on the number of videos you have watched, it records the time you have spent learning, the number of days each student has been watching the videos. So, they used all that plus the final exams that we write to give us marks. There were also group works that we do for assessment [PW1].

Another participant revealed:

We were doing group discussions, assignments, and presentations every week. Everyone was supposed to speak. If it is the turn of your group, you will have interviews, interaction with colleagues. So, I think the assessment was somehow okay. But it wasn't effective as compared to the face-to-face teaching [PW2]
...our school was using the Xuexitong app for assessment. We were having weekly assignment and we submitted that through the platform. We had the end of the semester exam through the same platform. It was usually timed and you could only open it when it was time for you to open, and end at the exact time it is supposed to end [PW4].

While these opinions are expressed with regard to the mode of assessment of the post-graduate students', most of them expressed the view that during the class presentation, they were made to officially dress as if they were physically meeting with their colleagues and tutors. Sometimes too, it appeared to them as though, they were in China with their colleagues, especially when most group members for a class presentation were native speakers of the Chinese language. Indeed, this presupposition by online post-graduate students as they imagined being in China with colleagues—when indeed it is a mirage—is best explained by the social presence theory by John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie of 1976, as explained earlier.

6. Conclusion and Implication for Policy

This study explored the experiences of Ghanaian post-graduate students studying Chinese language online. While acquiring knowledge in Chinese

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language serves as an opportunity for the student, the findings revealed that fully engaging in online language learning alone is highly inadequate for equipping students with the needed skills and knowledge, especially at the post-graduate level. Participants consistently expressed a preference for traditional face-to-face classroom learning over online instruction. Various challenges related to internet connectivity, expensive data bundle, social isolation and the stress of balancing academic work with other responsibilities. Nevertheless, the participants adopted various coping strategies in navigating through these challenges during the pursuit of their studies, including sleeping time management, avoidance of smartphones disruptions and adoption of video technology apps to augment the online learning.

Recommendations on how best to conduct online teaching and learning were solicited from participants as follows:

As I said, student-teacher interaction is seriously low during online learning. So, giving students more group work /assignments will compel students to build that classmate relationship and social interaction. I also think that school administrators of online programme should consider time differences between countries of participating students when preparing their timetable for teaching and learning.

I think in order to make studying easy for those studying online; lecturers must share the course materials to the students ahead of time, so that they will be able to go through before lectures. At a point that you don't have study materials, you don't know what to study before class. So, it is somehow very difficult and challenging [PW2].

Universal academic learning apps are recommended to be introduced to students by their universities of learning to enable them complement online learning. *But sometimes the development of app too helps. For instance, there is this app called "Supertest". Me personally, I have realized that if I only read, I find*

difficult to grasp the meaning and understanding of the content. So, maybe they [universities] can introduce a common app to students. They can even make online videos so that before a lecture time, one can watch [PW2].

This study cannot claim to be exhaustive. It has been limited in many areas including the sample size for generalization. While our participants for this study are unique in the sense of them not voluntarily choosing to offer their post-graduate studies in Chinese language online, we propose that future research could expand the scope of the study by increasing the number of participants to compare the experiences of such cohort with those who voluntarily choose to engage in similar studies online. Studies could also be conducted on students who have had the opportunity to travel to China, for their post-graduate studies in the Chinese language, post Covid-19 era.

Declarations

We declare that this paper is an original work from our individual efforts, and that it is not currently under consideration for publication or otherwise by any other journal or publisher. Where appropriate, we have acknowledged or quoted the sources of other people's work.

Availability of Data and Materials

Data set for this paper could be accessed by writing and requesting for such from the corresponding author. The reason for which such request is made should be explicitly stated in the request letter.

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