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The contribution of social networking platforms to organisational learning in an industrial family business

Beinn Purvis[1] | Maocai Zhang[2]

[1]Department of Management, BIBS School of Management, Prague, Czech Republic.

[2]Doctor Business Administration, IPAG Business School, Paris, France.

Correspondence

Corresponding author Beinn Purvis,
Email: beinnpurvis@hotmail.com

Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the role of social networking platforms in contributing to the learning capabilities of industrial family firms. It addresses gaps in organisational learning research, particularly concerning the specific types of organisations studied, which often focus on public entities.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Using the theoretical framework of the learning organisation, which includes seven dimensions, this research analyses a case study of a Chinese industrial family business employing two distinct social networking platforms: WeChat and DingTalk. Data were collected through individual and focus group interviews, as well as company observations.

Findings – The findings underscore the complementary roles of WeChat and DingTalk in fostering organisational learning. WeChat facilitates dynamic and flexible knowledge sharing, while DingTalk provides managerial control and formal documentation. Together, these networking platforms enhance both individual and collective learning within the company.

Practical Implications– This study provides valuable insights for managers on the effective use of social networking platforms to build learning organisations, particularly within family businesses. It highlights the importance of integrating informal and formal social networking platforms to support continuous learning and organisational development.

KEYWORDS

Organisational learning, social networking platforms, family business, case study.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Organisational learning can be defined as the acquisition and application of knowledge by individual or collective actors to decision-making and political processes (Miller 1996). A key emerging topic in organisational learning is the role of social networking platforms (Ghebali-Boukhris 2018, Zhan et al. 2020, Jewel 2021) and the acceptance of these technologies by stakeholders (Lissillour 2018). Social networking platforms are defined as Internet applications based on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, enabling the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Research on this subject has mainly focused on general types of companies or public organisations. However, focusing on specific organisational contexts, such as family firms, allows for a more robust theoretical construction (Lee and Baskerville 2003, Bocquet et al. 2010, Avenier and Thomas 2015). Research on organisational learning in family firms,

whether industrial or not, is in its infancy (Bentebbaa 2014, Bentebbaa et al. 2018). Given that family businesses represent around 80% of businesses worldwide[†], this article focuses on how social networking platforms contribute to organisational learning in industrial family businesses.

Furthermore, the growing use of social networking platforms within industrial settings, such as WhatsApp and Teams in Western countries and WeChat and DingTalk in China, has yet to be adequately addressed despite their significant impact on organisational learning. Social networking platforms offer organisations new opportunities that have been the subject of numerous publications (Leonardi and Vaast 2016). They "improve our ability to connect, communicate and collaborate" (Jue et al. 2009, p. 44) and have a positive influence on organisational performance (Davison et al. 2014), information sharing (Guechtouli and Purvis

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[†] https://familybusinessunited.com/2020/10/27/globally-most-businesses-are-family-owned/ (Accessed on 23 September 2022).

2024), the exchange of tacit knowledge (Lissillour and Ruel 2023) and trust (Lissillour and Sahut 2023). These networking platforms are increasingly used in the workplace, where they offer new organisational learning capabilities (Kane et al. 2010, Treem and Leonardi 2012).

Additionally, information sharing is essential for family businesses to become learning organisations (Chandler 2021). However, these businesses require sufficient technological capacity to transfer tacit and explicit knowledge effectively (Zahra et al. 2007). Previous research on learning organisations in family firms has been limited, often quantitative, and has not considered the role of social networking platforms (Birdthistle and Fleming 2005) despite their significance (Leonardi 2014).

This research aims to fill three gaps in the literature: first, to deepen the understanding of learning organisations through the lens of family firms; second, to investigate the role of social networking platforms in industrial contexts; and third, to explore the role of social networking platforms in learning within family businesses. This research addresses an exploratory question: to what extent do social networking platforms contribute to industrial family businesses displaying the characteristics of a learning organisation?

The contributions of this research are multifaceted. First, given the unprecedented rise of social networking platforms in industrial settings (Veldeman et al. 2017), this article contributes to industrial management knowledge by providing an in-depth case study of WeChat and DingTalk, two of the most widely used social networking platforms in China‡, one of the largest industrial countries in the world (Ekman 2018). Previous research has focused on aspects such as trust between WeChat users (Lien and Cao 2014), the values promoting continued use (Zhang et al. 2017), user satisfaction drivers (Lien et al. 2017) and user behaviour (Liu et al. 2018). While information sharing has been somewhat addressed (Jin et al. 2017), questions about organisational learning facilitated by the use of social networking platforms such as WeChat and DingTalk have been explored in very few works (Khan and Khan 2019, Zhan et al. 2020). Secondly, by applying the learning organisation model proposed by Watkins and Marsick (1997) to a case study on social networking platform use, we demonstrate the relevance and adaptability of this pre-social networking platform model. Thirdly, in the spirit of endogenous scholarship (Rodriguez-Escobar 2024), this article contributes to the literature on family businesses by providing insights from the Chinese family perspective. Lastly, it differentiates the complementary contributions of social networking platforms to the learning organisation according to their type: corporate social networking platforms and informal social networking platforms.

To address the research question, we conducted a case study in a family-owned industrial company in China, where successive failures of several ERP implementations led to the increased use of social networking platforms. This study shows the distinct use of these two social networking platforms for learning at the individual, team and organisational levels in the family-owned industrial company.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Organisational learning in family businesses

Organisational learning has become a source of competitive advantage and performance, giving rise to extensive research over the last three decades (De Geus 1988 1998, Tsang 1997). Family businesses, faced with international competition, must develop new strategies (Baker and Sinkula 1999, Farrell 2000), in particular, organisational learning strategies, that enable them to take new directions based on newly acquired knowledge (Birdthistle and Fleming 2005), allowing them to constantly evolve and meet ever-changing customer needs (Kaufman 1992). Consequently, "organisational learning is considered by many scholars as a key to future organisational success" (Lukas et al. 1996, p. 233), which is why organisations of all kinds aim to become "learning organisations". Koenig (2015) believes that there is a consensus around organisational learning and the ability it gives organisations to survive and develop. According to Moilanen (2001):

> "A learning organisation is a consciously managed organisation with 'learning' as a vital component of its values, vision and goals, as well as in its everyday operations and their assessment. The learning organisation eliminates structural obstacles to learning, creates enabling structures and takes care of assessing its learning and development. It invests in leadership to assist individuals in finding the purpose, in eliminating personal obstacles and in facilitating structures for personal learning and getting feedback and benefits from learning outcomes" (p. 11).

Early research on learning organisations often focused on public sector entities (Finger and Brand 1999). However, family businesses also exhibit the potential to become learning organisations due to their minimal hierarchy and formalisation (Elbahjaoui et al. 2021) and behaviour standardisation (Swieringa and Wierdsma 1992), although family culture can influence rational aspects (Meyssonnier and Zawadzki 2008). Bentebbaa et al. (2018) discuss the unique aspects of organisational learning in family businesses, influenced by family dynamics, which can have positive or negative effects on learning, while also advocating for more research focusing on learning processes in family businesses. Given that most organisational learning research has targeted capital-intensive companies or public-sector organisations (e.g. in the high-tech sector, (Rodriguez-Escobar and Lissillour 2022)), there is a need for new research into organisational learning in different organisational contexts (Lee and Baskerville 2003, Avenier and Thomas 2015) such as family businesses.

Family businesses, which contribute significantly to economic growth in every country (De Massis et al. 2019, Meddeb 2021) and account for more than two-thirds of all businesses (Poulain-Rehm 2019), present a complex and heterogeneous group (Missonier and Gundolf 2017). Defining a "family business" is not easy, and Meddeb (2021) considers

that defining it requires taking "into account the evolution of ties within the family itself. The family is no longer seen solely as a stable, reunifying entity, but also as a group of actors with divergent expectations and interests" (p. 14).

2.2 | Analysis framework

The theoretical framework used in this analysis is based on the Watkins and Marsick (1997) model of the learning organisation, which was further developed by Birdthistle and Fleming (2005) and Watkins and Kim (2018). This framework was selected because it aligns with the assumptions of both 'organisational learning' and 'learning organisation', particularly regarding forms of learning or change processes (Huber 1991). More specifically, the Watkins and Marsick (1997) framework was chosen because it includes the dimensions of a learning organisation at several relevant levels (Redding 1997). In particular, the individual and the team levels, together constitute the "human" level (Yang et al. 2004) and the organisational level, which constitutes the "structural" level. These two levels are considered interactive components of organisational change and development. In detail, the theoretical framework defines seven dimensions of a learning organisation, four of which belong to the human level and three to the structural level (Table 1). These seven dimensions, split between two levels, have been identified as being well-suited to the study of family businesses (Birdthistle and Fleming 2005, Yang et al. 2004).

Table 1 illustrates the proposed Watkins and Marsick (1997) learning organisation model which was reformulated by Birdthistle and Fleming (2005).

This section aims to go into the details of this theoretical framework and explain each of the seven dimensions according to the work of Watkins and Marsick (1997) and Birdthistle and Fleming (2005). The first four dimensions belong to the "human" level, which combines the notions of the individual and the team.

The first dimension is the creation of continuous learning opportunities for the members of an organisation. Continuous learning is defined as "directed and long term effort to learn, desire to acquire knowledge and skills, and participation in activities that facilitate learning" (Garofano and Salas 2005, p. 282). In this analytical framework, individuals share their learning to enable an organisation to learn by facilitating knowledge transfer and integrating learning into organisational routines and actions. Individuals need to learn frequently and share their learning so that the system as a whole can learn at all three levels of learning (individual, team, organisational). Continuous learning brings competitive advantages (van Breda-Verduijn and Heijboer 2016).

The second dimension is facilitating enquiry and dialogue by creating a culture of questioning, feedback, information exchange and experimentation. In this way, members of the organisation acquire the productive reasoning skills to express their points of view and the ability to listen to and take an interest in the perspectives of others. The aim is for the organisation to develop a culture that promotes questioning, feedback and experimentation (Watkins and Marsick 1997). In this

way, employees are encouraged to think in new and critical ways in order to identify hypotheses through dialogue. Importance is placed on the creation, capture and transfer of knowledge so that those who need it can access and use it quickly. While these first two dimensions relate to the notion of the individual, the third concerns team learning and reflects "the collaborative spirit and collaborative skills that enable teams to be used effectively" (Watkins and Marsick 1996, p. 6). Teamwork thus provides access to diverse ways of thinking and is valued in corporate culture (Watkins and Marsick 1997).

The fourth dimension concerns the empowerment of the organisation's members to implement a shared vision (Rupčić 2021). Even in hybrid organisations (Wang 2024), companies are to create and share a collective vision, adapting it based on feedback from its members. Empowering members towards a collective vision means involving them in defining, owning and implementing the shared vision. From this perspective, responsibility is distributed to motivate individuals to learn what they are accountable for (Birdthistle and Fleming 2005).

The next three dimensions concern the structural level. The fifth indicates efforts to establish systems for capturing and sharing learning. Such systems may vary in integration and may include both high-tech and low-tech systems. Recently, an empirical study conducted during the COVID-19 period showed that these integrated systems have a significant positive relationship with the culture of learning organisations (Alonazi 2021).

The sixth dimension concerns the connection of systems, which requires reflection and the structuring of actions aimed at connecting the organisation to its environment. This connection enables members to better see the impact of their work on the company as a whole, understand their environment, and adapt their practices accordingly. Connecting systems is an integral part of an organisation's learning culture (Arefin et al. 2020).

The seventh and final dimension is strategic leadership, where leaders "think systematically about how to use learning to create change and move the organisation in new directions or markets" (Watkins and Marsick 1996, p. 7). They advocate and support learning strategically to achieve tangible business results.

The description of the seven dimensions, grouped into two non-hierarchical levels (Watkins and Marsick 1997), makes this theoretical framework of the learning organisation an actionable tool for deciphering how social networking platforms can contribute to the creation of a learning organisation by leveraging these seven dimensions.

3 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Few studies have explored the idea that the use of social networking platforms can contribute to organisational learning (Ghebali-Boukhris 2018, Khan and Khan 2019, Zhan et al. 2020, Jewel 2021). Although the use of social networking platforms in industry is increasing (Veldeman et al. 2017), to our knowledge, no research has explored how they can contribute to making an organisation a learning entity. Moreover,

T A B L E 1   The two levels and seven dimensions of the learning organisation (Watkins and Marsick 1997, Birdthistle and Fleming 2005).

The Human Level: Individuals and Teams	The Structural Level
1) Creates opportunities for continuous learning	5) Connects the organisation to its environment
2) Facilitates investigation and dialogue	6) Sets up systems to capture and share learning
3) Encourages cooperation and team learning	7) Facilitates strategic leadership for learning
4) Gives you the power to achieve a shared vision	

considering that the world's industrial fabric is mostly made up of family businesses (Poulain-Rehm 2019), which compete against more capital-intensive businesses, often with greater resources (Zahra 2003), it is essential to explore these organisations in particular. Thus, a qualitative research approach is necessary to study this complex and novel phenomenon in the academic community.

Among the various methods, the case study approach has proven effective in understanding phenomena in real contexts (Eisenhardt 1989, Yin 2017). Following other research examples (Bonet-Fernandez et al. 2014, Lissillour and Rodríguez-Escobar 2020), we opted for a case study-based method to investigate our research question in depth. According to Yin (2017), a single case study is justified when it captures the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation. In this study, we seek to better understand the social processes related to how social networking platforms contribute to organisational learning in family businesses. We have selected a common case that corresponds to this theme, namely a family business that uses several types of social networking platform.

The concept of the family firm has been defined in many ways and is based on a research stream different from that of research on small and medium-sized enterprises (Harms 2014). The field of family business research became an autonomous academic field with Donnelley (1964), his seminal work, which argued that:

"A business is considered a family business when it has been closely identified with at least two generations of a family and when this connection has had a mutual influence on company policy and the interests and objectives of the family" (Donnelley 1964, p. 94).

Thus, unlike the size of the business, the involvement of family members in the business has become the specificity of family businesses (Zachary 2011). Indeed, family business "ranges from small mom-and-pop shops to billion-dollar family-owned corporations" (Handler 1989, p. 259). The company selected for this study was founded by the father and is currently run by his two sons, meeting the criteria of a family business. In the logic of collective research (Beaulieu et al. 2024), the second author is a family member and a researcher who played the role of boundary spanner between the academia and the research field. In line with the requirements of collective research (Beaulieu et al. 2024), the latter was also engaged in developing the methodological and epistemological reflexivity required for this type of research.

3.1 | Presentation of a case study

We undertook a longitudinal case study over a two-year period (2018-2019) in a family-owned industrial company founded in 2003 and based in Qingdao, Shandong province, China. With over 600 employees, the company manufactures spare parts for the automotive industry. This choice was motivated by the company's mixed experience with ERP implementation and its extensive use of social networking platforms for information sharing. Unlike service sectors, industrial companies are generally larger, making this company a representative case. In addition, studying different social networking platforms would be less relevant in a smaller family business. We had easy access to the field, enabling us to conduct interviews with managers from different departments and at different hierarchical levels.

In this company, certain industrial activities are managed by two information systems: a manufacturing execution system (MES) and an ERP system. However, many other processes are not managed by these systems, creating an organisational gap filled by the WeChat social networking platform for operational purposes. Indeed, many information exchanges were not facilitated by the MES or ERP and required a more flexible information system. For example, the information needed to keep the machines running smoothly is conveyed by MES, but exchanges between employees on subjects related to production and new projects were not supported but were easily done via WeChat. As the company grew, the CEO (the son) sought to make its services and structure more scalable and standardised by applying another social networking platform, DingTalk, to optimise the use of such platforms. While exchanges via WeChat are very effective because they are quick and personalised, recurring requests such as budget validation or holiday requests need more systematisation, which were difficult to fit into the ERP framework.

3.2 | Data collection and analysis

As suggested by Yin (2017), after reviewing the literature to identify a framework for analysis, we collected data through 16 individual interviews and three collective interviews (focus groups) lasting an average of 45 minutes, as well as observations within the company (5 hours in total). We selected interviewees from internal supply chain departments (production, sales, purchasing and logistics) to ensure a plurality of perspectives for triangulation (Yin 2017). In addition, we selected employees from three management departments (general management, information systems management and human resources management)

to further triangulate the data and gain additional perspectives on the topic (Kumar et al. 1993). Collected data is presented in Table 2.

4 | CASE ANALYSIS

WeChat, launched by Tencent in January 2011, provides instant messaging services on smartphones, allowing users to send voice messages, videos, images and texts quickly and free of charge. It has since evolved to offer other services, such as shopping, gaming and banking, making it the most popular social networking platform in China, with one billion users. Company employees began using the application personally in 2011, with its use gradually spreading within the company in 2012.

DingTalk, introduced by Alibaba in January 2014, is designed to improve management and collaboration in Chinese businesses. It provides a platform to facilitate communication, coordination and decision-making, usable on both smartphones and computers. It facilitates internal communication thanks to its chat functionalities that integrate phone, SMS and voice messages, and also includes specific functions for managers. The initial implementation of DingTalk was carried out in 2017. Usage of WeChat and DingTalk varies across the company; the sales director noted: "In my team, we interact mainly via WeChat, 70%, and 30% via DingTalk".

Data collected from WeChat and DingTalk was coded according to the seven dimensions of the learning organisation framework. Five of the seven dimensions were identified for WeChat, while DingTalk accounted for four. This suggests a complementary role between the two social networking platforms in supporting organisational learning.

4.1 | WeChat

4.1.1 | Dimension 1: Creates opportunities for continuous learning

Employees are willing to share their information and knowledge via WeChat, which they believe contributes to smooth internal collaboration. Production managers who took part in the focus group explained that: "When there is a special task, a new project, we will create a new group" (production discussion group). Once the project has been successfully completed, the group will be rewarded as a whole. However, WeChat does not support long-term knowledge storage and control. As noted by members of the quality management team in the focus group: "We use DingTalk because, with WeChat, we lose the files after a while. For example, if an image or statistics are really important, then we send them via DingTalk" (Focus group on quality). While WeChat is central for teams to maintain a point of contact, including external stakeholders, DingTalk is preferred for preserving crucial documents. Quality management teams highlighted: "Certain groups are used continuously because we have new elements and need to make corrections to satisfy customer needs. Customers really appreciate this collective continuous quality process in which they are involved" (focus group on quality).

4.1.2 | Dimension 2: Facilitates investigation and dialogue

WeChat enables the aggregation and exchange of knowledge between stakeholders effectively. The head of the sales team noted: "Today I received a new project; the customer explains that he needs a special type of piston rod; he shares images or drawings in 2D or 3D and additional details in the group, and then we interact". On WeChat, team members get a comprehensive overview of the issue at hand. For example, in the sales department, "we can check from start to finish what the problem is, what has happened, what has been done and what the final conclusion is" (Sales Manager). A manager can create a working group on WeChat and invite specific individuals to join, who will tacitly know who is responsible, although the system does not provide a codified means of representing the chain of responsibility. In the event of a problem, finding necessary information from the discussion history can be time-consuming. Nevertheless, in practice, WeChat is widely used to manage cross-functional processes. For example, the purchasing manager reports: "If the warehouse wants us to buy additional materials and they haven't made that clear in their report, then we can communicate with them on WeChat". WeChat allows users to develop a global view of a subject through rich communication and a longitudinal view of contextualised data.

4.1.3 | Dimension 3: Encourages cooperation and team learning

WeChat is mainly used for daily communication among employees and teams across all departments and management. As a result of the disenchantment that followed the introduction of the first ERP system, employees and managers began to use WeChat spontaneously. This practice originated from individual initiatives, leveraging a familiar social networking platform from their private lives, rather than a decision by the information systems department. More specifically, employees often had negative experiences with the ERP before transitioning to WeChat for company communications. The ERP implementation encountered issues, such as the inability to attach files and e-mails, leading employees to favour WeChat for its comprehensive communication features. As employees could easily take advantage of such features, this social networking platform offered them a natural way of communicating on a more familiar platform. WeChat has proved effective in fostering cooperation between employees and between teams from different departments. It allows the creation of ad hoc groups for short-term projects or structural groups for managing specific administrative processes. The Sales Director explains:

"We create WeChat groups when we have quality issues, to discuss new projects, and for the sales team. For quality issues, we include four types of people: sales and the quality manager on our side, and the purchasing and quality manager on the other side.

TABLE 2 Data collected.

Code	Department	Business	Type of collection	Duration (in min)	Number of verbatim pages
IT1	IT	IT manager	Interview 1	24	10
PD1	Production	Director of Planning	Interview 2	14	5
SL1	Sale	Sales Manager	Interview 3	55	5
PD2	Production	Production Manager	Interview 4	19	8
PD3	Production	Machinery and raw materials supervisor	Focus group 1	31	11
PD4	Production	Production technician	Focus group 1	31	11
PD5	Production	Heat treatment technician	Focus group 1	31	11
QL1	Quality	Quality Manager	Focus group 2	17	4
QL2	Quality	Quality Director	Focus group 2	17	4
PC1	Purchasing	Purchasing Manager	Interview 5	20	12
SL2	Sale	Quality engineer	Focus group 3	18	7
SL3	Sale	International Orders Manager	Focus group 3	18	7
SL4	Logistics	Shipment planning technician	Focus group 3	18	7
HR1	HR	HR Director	Interview 6	16	6
CEO	Managing Director	CEO	Interview 7	32	11
WR1	Logistics	Warehouse Manager	Interview 8	10	3

For new projects, the group involves sales, the quality manager, engineers, production and the general manager".

4.1.4 | Dimension 4: Empowers people to achieve a shared vision

WeChat enables the spontaneous and open exchange of different types of knowledge to achieve common goals. Team members value "face", influencing how they share knowledge on social networking platforms. The CEO recounts: "There are a lot of workgroups [in WeChat] that I'm not in because if I am, they don't say anything. They've kicked me out". This allows free and creative knowledge exchange, unconstrained by authority. WeChat empowers workgroups to make agile decisions independently, especially those that do not require the CEO's approval, facilitating operational decisions that are non-strategic and within their remit.

4.1.5 | Dimension 6: Establishes systems to capture and share learning

WeChat enables the creation of groups from different departments for the exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge. This system, structured around processes or projects, can also capture implicit content. Informants described WeChat's ability to provide discussion histories and rich language features, such as emoticons, which help users to better understand stakeholders' positions. For example, the Sales Director stated: "On WeChat, we can use emoticons to convey emotions without telling the boss what we think". This allows users to grasp the commitment, enthusiasm or doubts of the various parties involved in discussions. Thus, learning extends beyond explicit information that is shared to include subtle, intersubjective information that is conveyed with indirect communication and emoticons. WeChat also facilitates the creation of vertical groups, connecting various departments with the CEO or between managers and their teams.

4.1.6 | Dimension 7: Facilitates strategic leadership for learning

On WeChat, users have access to different groups based on their hierarchical position, only invited into these groups when a member of the group deems that their participation is necessary. For example, when a new department manager is appointed, they are invited into the relevant groups by existing members. For example, the production department reports: "Given that 20 people work in the workshop, we have several sub-team leaders and team leaders who have their own separate WeChat groups" (production focus group). Groups do not have an official moderator but have an instigator who assumes leadership by creating a group at a given time for a particular discussion. This leadership is temporary and contingent on the group's usefulness and members' participation. Thus, WeChat facilitates the emergence of ad hoc, bottom-up and spontaneous leadership. The IT and purchasing departments describe WeChat as a highly effective tool for sharing various types of knowledge and for leaders to communicate their values and motivate their teams. The Sales Director agrees:

"To motivate people, I'll share good news in the group, such as an increase in orders, or send an invitation to lunch together. We can share fun news to raise the mood. I can send red envelopes to the group when there's good news to celebrate or national holidays".

4.2 | DingTalk

4.2.1 | Dimension 1: Creates opportunities for continuous learning

According to the data collected, DingTalk enables managerial control of information and knowledge sharing for effective transactional exchanges. Unlike WeChat, DingTalk's features prevent knowledge leakage. Knowledge aggregation and development are stimulated by

DingTalk's principles of automation, standardisation and formalisation of information exchanges. Different types of formal information can be exchanged within functional teams and then aggregated with other sources to generate results, i.e. knowledge. Interviewees emphasised the transactional purpose of sharing knowledge via DingTalk: "You work 22 days a month, how much overtime you've worked, how much holiday you've taken, it's all recorded, and can be exported to an Excel sheet. HR will use a formula in that Excel sheet to calculate your salary" (Human Resources Director). DingTalk has thus become the company's formal payroll management tool: "From now on, I'll issue payslips based on the data recorded on DingTalk, and they [the employees] will have to comply with it" (CEO).

4.2.2 | Dimension 2: Facilitates investigation and dialogue

In the event of an investigation, users can use DingTalk to search for verified elements, as the system saves all exchanged content. According to the sales manager: "In DingTalk, we can only explain very briefly what the result is, what the action is. It's more like a report than a discussion" (Sales Manager). These reports and formal documents provide users with official documents for dialogue, primarily concerning information relating to the company's internal processes, though key accounts are also included. For example, within the sales team:

> "We are now starting to use DingTalk CRM. I will use DingTalk if I want to get information from customers through one-to-one communication, as DingTalk does not support groups with external participants. We use WeChat to do work groups with customers. But only large Chinese customers use DingTalk and some customers are not authorised by their company to use DingTalk. If I'm looking for new colleagues, I'll use DingTalk. But if I want to establish a relationship with my old colleagues, I'll use WeChat more".

4.2.3 | Dimension 5: Connects the organisation to its environment

While the sales department continues to use WeChat for rapid communication with customers and internal departments, quality management is officially handled by ERP, yet quality control employees prefer to use WeChat for efficient problem-solving and better communication with other stakeholders. Due to their frequent contact with both external and internal stakeholders, the purchasing and sales departments make the most strategic use of WeChat. Interviewees from the sales department explained that WeChat is the most widely used medium because it supports customer relations, their main source of influential information capital. Once information is entered into DingTalk, the sales department can lose its power of influence. DingTalk was initially used for recording attendance, but it was promoted by the CEO for operational purposes and to separate employees' professional and personal

lives. However, WeChat remains popular as DingTalk is seen as being too formal and transparent to the hierarchy. Moreover, it is difficult for employees to create working groups with external participants, causing significant challenges, especially for sales and purchasing departments who work closely with customers and suppliers using WeChat. Despite these issues, DingTalk performs well in knowledge sharing as it allows users to verify the receipt of information, which is essential for internalising information and converting it into knowledge. DingTalk is used to share and aggregate different types of formal content, as the Sales Manager explains: "In DingTalk, we use large groups with our department and with all the other departments where we only share formal content: orders, prices, contracts, calculations and customer responses" (Sales Manager). Dimension 6: Establishes systems to capture and share learning DingTalk was introduced in 2017, after all of the employees were already accustomed to using WeChat. However, WeChat complicated other organisational learning processes, such as creating a cumulative database of all relevant content within the company. DingTalk, on the other hand, makes it possible to control the transfer of knowledge by recording discussions and attachments in the company database. The managers interviewed explained that:

> "DingTalk is more efficient because if you make an announcement on WeChat, only one-third of the people will read it, but if you send it on DingTalk, everyone will read it. This is because DingTalk shows who has read which message and who hasn't" (focus group on production).

5 | DISCUSSION

The discussion section is divided into two parts, the first dealing with the "human" level and the second with the "structural" level of the learning organisation framework (Watkins and Marsick 1997, Birdthistle and Fleming 2005). This section offers a multidimensional understanding of how social networking platforms contribute to the learning organisation and demonstrates how these two levels interrelate. These social networking platforms play a structural role while simultaneously being interwoven into individual and social practices, feeding into each other to enhance organisational learning.

5.1 | The learning organisation at the "human" level

First, we examine individual dimensions, followed by the team dimension. According to Watkins and Marsick (1997), two dimensions are crucial at the individual level for a learning organisation: 1) the creation of continuous learning opportunities and 2) the facilitation of inquiry and dialogue. The results for the first dimension indicate that both social networking platforms, WeChat and DingTalk, contribute to creating these opportunities but in different ways. WeChat allows dynamic and flexible sharing through ad hoc groups, fostering an individual learning

modality that integrates into organisational routines and actions. This learning is free from constraints, enabling spontaneous and creative exchanges. DingTalk, on the other hand, ensures managerial control over information sharing, facilitating effective transactional exchanges. DingTalk also facilitates investigation and dialogue by saving formal content in a precise format, allowing users to find verified elements easily. This contrasts with WeChat, where elements may not be verified and might not be stored long-term. DingTalk provides official documents for discussion, ensuring reliability and consistency in communication.

At the team level, Watkins and Marsick (1997) emphasise examining team collaboration and learning. The data indicate that social networking platforms are a collaboration modality inherent in all group work within the enterprise. WeChat supports team discussions, enabling members to gain a longitudinal understanding of issues, which is essential for solving problems creatively and collegially, thereby strengthening the company's competitiveness. In this way, WeChat enables teams to access different ways of thinking as they learn together. This form of collaboration is encouraged by leaders, who reward their teams through WeChat. Although DingTalk does not facilitate this dynamic exchange, it promotes cooperation and team learning by allowing resource owners to manage and share codified knowledge while retaining authorship.

WeChat is positioned as a tool that helps members achieve a collective vision by involving them in defining, appropriating and implementing it through contributions in groups. Participation in WeChat groups motivates members to learn what they are held accountable for. While WeChat enables free and creative exchange to achieve common goals, DingTalk formalises responsibility centres and allocates the necessary resources needed to achieve a shared vision.

5.2 | The learning organisation at the "structural" level

The four dimensions for analysing a learning organisation at the organisational level are: 1) establishing systems to capture and share learning, 2) empowering members to achieve a shared vision, 3) connecting the organisation to its environment, and 4) facilitating strategic leadership for learning.

Social networking platforms are integrated into the workplace, and all members of the organisation have access to them. WeChat enables the creation of cross-functional and vertical groups that facilitate the fluid exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge. DingTalk imposes a framework for teams to share information and knowledge according to the company's formal processes.

WeChat integrates customers and suppliers into groups, allowing members to see the impact of their work across the company. Through WeChat discussions, members better understand the company environment and can adapt their working practices accordingly. While WeChat facilitates interaction with people outside organisational boundaries, DingTalk makes it possible to integrate the legal environment into the company's administrative processes.

Leaders use social networking platforms to strategically shape learning. WeChat is used to encourage information exchange through motivational tools such as red envelopes and praise. DingTalk enables the design of formal channels for exchanging knowledge within the company. This complementarity explains the coexistence of the two networks, DingTalk and WeChat. Although senior management prefers DingTalk for its formality, WeChat meets the need for spontaneity, flexibility and discretion essential for smooth organisation operations. WeChat functions as a flexible coupling (Lissillour et al. 2020) that is necessary for the acceptance of restrictive technology.

Table 3 summarises the complementary nature of the two social networking platforms in terms of their contribution to the dimensions of a learning organisation.

6 | CONCLUSION

This study analysed how the use of social networking platforms (WeChat and DingTalk) in an industrial family business enables organisational learning. It contributes to the existing literature on family firms and social networking platforms by demonstrating that each network, based on its specific features, enhances organisational learning at both human (individual and team) and structural levels. The results help to conceptualise the role of social networking platforms in understanding family businesses as learning organisations.

The study also highlights the practical implications for managers, emphasising the importance of social networking platforms in building a learning organisation, particularly in the context of family businesses. By varying organisational contexts, this research adds to the ongoing debate, using a case study of a Chinese family business as a basis.

This research is, however, not without limitations. First, it is based on a Chinese context where the issue of data privacy is not as central as in other regions. Secondly, it relies on a single case study (Yin 2017). These limitations pose challenges for generalisation, which is usual for single case studies, and also for application of the results in other contexts such as the European Union where the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) constrains companies regarding the management of personal data generated and collected on social networking platforms.

Despite these limitations, the findings make it possible to envisage several research perspectives. The rise of social networking platforms for knowledge sharing could lead to power struggles within organisations, which could be studied using a practice-based view of knowledge (Lissillour 2021). Such studies could provide sociological insights into why practitioners accept or reject knowledge sharing. In addition, a practice-based perspective provides a better understanding of the sources of influence that lead to the maintenance or modification of pre-existing power relations (Lissillour and Bonet Fernandez 2018), which include knowledge endowment as a source of legitimacy and interest in the field (Lissillour and Monod 2024). It is worth continuing to examine in detail, by collecting data in other contexts, how social networking platforms enable the development of the learning organisation at the

TABLE 3 Complementary contribution of the two social networking platforms to the dimensions of the learning organisation.

Dimensions	WeChat (informal social networking platform)	DingTalk (Corporate social networking platform)
1) Creates opportunities for continuous learning	Dynamic knowledge transfer via ad hoc groups.	Managerial control of knowledge sharing for effective transactional exchange
2) Facilitates investigation and dialogue	Groups enable the exchange of information between members and give members a platform for problem-solving dialogue.	During surveys, users can find solid elements in DingTalk thanks to formal content saves following a precise formatting. These elements allow users to have official documents for dialogue.
3) Encourages cooperation and team learning	Group discussions enable members to benefit from a longitudinal understanding of the issue at hand, which is essential for solving problems creatively and collegially, thereby strengthening the company's competitiveness.	
4) Empowers people to achieve a shared vision	Different types of knowledge are exchanged freely and creatively to achieve a common goal.	
5) Connects the organisation to its environment	WeChat makes it easier to interact with people outside organisational boundaries.	DingTalk makes it possible to integrate the legal environment into company processes.
6) Sets up systems to capture and share learning	WeChat enables the creation of transversal and vertical groups for the exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge.	DingTalk requires teams to share the knowledge needed to comply with the company's formal processes.
7) Facilitates strategic leadership for learning	WeChat enables leaders to encourage the exchange of information by motivating members through red envelopes or praise addressed to the group or individuals.	

human level (individual and team) and at the structural level. If strategic alignment is a key to the success of knowledge sharing (Kearns and Lederer 2003, Lissillour et al. 2020), which organisational components should social networking platforms be strategically aligned with to best contribute to the learning organisation?

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The authors declare no potential conflict of interests.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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APPENDIX

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Beinn Purvis is a master's student at The University of Birmingham pursuing a degree in Translation Studies. He works as a Copy Editor for the journal *Integrative Conservation*, based at the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden, Chinese Academy of Sciences. He is also an Associate Researcher at BIBS School of Management, Czech Republic. His research interests are International Business and Administration, and his work has been published in international journals, such as Management Research Quarterly

Mao Cai Zhang became the general manager of Qingdao Zhang's Machinery Co., Ltd. in 2003. In 2018, he established an overseas factory and founded Zhang's Machinery (Romania) Co., Ltd. He completed his doctorate at IPAG Business School in 2018 with a thesis entitled 'ERP implementation and standardization of processes: A practice view of IS moves in a manufacturing family business in China'. Since 2019, he has been responsible for the operations management of Qingdao Zhang's Shangjia Technology Co., Ltd. In 2022, he acquired the foreign-owned enterprise Qingdao Meide Rubber Plastics Co., Ltd. He currently serves as the chairman and general manager of Qingdao Zhang's Shangjia Technology Co., Ltd., Qingdao Meide Rubber Plastics Co., Ltd., and Zhang's Machinery (Romania) Co., Ltd.