The texts that bind us: How chatrooms help international students in Trinity College

By Russell Goh, Abdulmalik Aldabbagh and Joyce Zhou

"It provides a sense of comfort and connection back to where I came from, and with new friends I have made," says Zack, a student from Cambodia. Interestingly, he is talking about Instagram and not Microsoft Teams, the official platform Trinity College provides its students for communication. But what does Instagram, the app that most of us associate with 10-second videos, have to do with schoolwork?



Students usually keep an array of Chatroom apps at their disposal, such as Instagram. Photo: Russell Goh, Abdulmalik Aldabbagh and Joyce Zhou.

To find out, we sent out an online Google Forms survey and sat down for interviews with ten Trinity College students From Saudi Arabia, Singapore, China and Cambodia, on 24 July 2026. We found that students feel a sense of connection to home through messaging in their chosen app rather than a simple preference for one app over another.

One function, different favorites

Overall, Instagram came out on top and was named by 6 out of 10 respondents as their most used app. While WhatsApp remained the clear favorite among Singaporean students, Snapchat among Saudis, WeChat among the Chinese students we spoke to, and reddit as a fallback of browsing rather than direct messaging, almost all students mentioned Instagram as their favorite app for chatting. The reasons for their choices were the same, regardless of their preference: privacy, easy communication, and keeping in touch with friends and family.

Privacy over publicity

Going in, we assumed group chats would dominate, as student life is usually pictured as big and busy threads of text with everyone pilling in. Yet, most students told us they preferred one-on-one conversations, and privacy was the reason why. Texting makes it easier to be honest, several students told us, as talking to only

one person feels safe, with no risk of being overheard. For students still getting the hang of life in a new country, that one-on-one space is often the first place they can admit they're struggling. Students tend to trust their best friends first, and private chats make that conversation more comfortable.



Being able to chat with friends makes life easier, but that is easier said than done when studying in a different country. Photo: Ball Snow via pexels.

Instagram wins over teams, every time

Microsoft teams is Trinity College's official channel for classroom communication, but when we asked students where they usually held conversations, the answer was almost unanimous: on Instagram. The respondents described Teams as a strictly academic app with a stiflingly formal atmosphere: something you open for coursework, deadlines, and teacher assigned tasks, then close and forget. Instagram does the opposite job, keeping both coursework and small-talk alive beyond the classroom.

One respondent joked that Teams "smells like a deadline," but agreed that it's useful to get updates from teachers. In contrast, Instagram is where you ask a classmate a quick question, plan a coffee run with them, or just check in with no meeting invitation required. On Instagram, switching subjects happens so fast, you're unlikely to notice – one moment you're asking a friend about an assignment, the next you're swapping memes or making weekend plans with them, all in the same thread. On Instagram, "colleagues" and people you might smile at but never speak to in an elevator can become real friends, the kind of people you would casually text on a random Tuesday about good food or terrible weather. Instead of replacing Teams, Instagram complements it by filling the gaps in everything Teams was never built to do.

Why This is Not a Small Thing

It would be easy to wave a hand and file all of this under "students are on their phones too much", but we don't think that's the real story, and we didn't expect to come out of our interviews feeling any differently about it either.

For international students at Trinity College, these chatrooms are where assignments are untangled at midnight, where one can talk through their homesickness with someone back home, and where a stranger from a group project slowly turns into an actual friend. Not everything important about the semester

happens in a lecture hall or in classrooms: for students living in Melbourne without family nearby, a phone screen keeps their loved ones always close to their heart. Most people don't think twice about chatrooms, but they are a reminder that the world is smaller than it sometimes feels.