Cultural Values Inherent in the Design of Social Media Platforms: A Case Study of WeChat

Research in Progress

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a tremendous rise in the growth of social media platforms all over the world. Most social media platforms are created for worldwide consumption and it is usually a significant challenge to develop these platforms for users from various cultural backgrounds. While culturally centric user behaviour of social media platforms has been well-documented, the cultural values inherent within the design of these platforms has not been thoroughly explored. This study proposes a conceptual cultural values model to examine the cultural characteristics inherent within WeChat, a Chinese social media platform. We use a research model based on Chinese cultural values to validate the model for the full scale study.

Keywords: Social Media, Cultural Values, China, Design.

1   Introduction

While many social media platforms are created for worldwide consumption, it is usually a significant challenge to develop these platforms for users from various cultural backgrounds (Hoehle, Zhang, & Venkatesh, 2015). This is increasingly important as the use of a social media platforms often reflects the cultural values of the user (Chu & Choi, 2010; Qiu, Lin, & Leung, 2013). While there have been quite a few papers recently published that examine a user–centred approach i.e. how cultural contexts shape social media use (Gan, 2017; Y. Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011), there are fewer studies that examine the influence of cultural values on social media platform design. A study by Van Belleghem (2011) highlights the differences in social media penetration between Western European countries and others such as India and Brazil. Together with Gong, L. Stump, and G. Li (2014) they conclude that the differences in diffusion of social media across countries highlights the need for global e-marketers to appreciate why people in a particular country may be more receptive to and prone to adopt online social media than people in other countries.

This paper attends to this research agenda by reflecting on the underlying cultural values that motivate the design of a Chinese social media platform, WeChat. The exploration of cultural values inherent in the design of social media platforms is motivated by Aral, Dellarocas, and Godes (2013) and Kane, Alavi, Labianca, and Borgatti (2014). Both set of researchers present research frameworks and research agendas to encourage scholars to explore the impacts social media has on organisations and society. Features built into social media platforms either enable or constrain user behaviour, while providing the building blocks to allow interactions of social processes. The design of social media platforms is important to understand because they enable interactions of social processes and culture that affect the fabric of society (Aral et al., 2013).

In the current research in progress paper, our goal is to explore the cultural values inherent in a Chinese based social media platforms using WeChat as an example. While the idea that culture is entwined in the design of information systems and applications is not new (Reinecke & Bernstein, 2013), it is an area that is understudied, especially in the Chinese context. Therefore, the research question for this study is: *what are the cultural values inherent in the design of social media platforms?* WeChat is a mobile instant text and voice messaging communication service and has become an important social media platform in China. Because social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are blocked in China, WeChat has been specifically created based on important Chinese cultural elements. Lin (2013) asserts that in essence, cultural values represent the most basic and core beliefs of a society, and these beliefs largely influence our communication patterns. Hence, culture can potentially play a significant role in the creation of social media platforms, such as WeChat.

Research indicates that the most important of Hofstede's dimensions for distinguishing among national cultures, is collectivism–individualism (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; U. E. Kim, Triandis, Kâğitçibaşi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994; Triandis & Trafimow, 2001), especially in the context of social media platforms (Chau, 2008). In this paper we use this dimension as a starting point to explore the particular values inherent in Chinese culture that are in turn reflected in the design of WeChat. To this end, we begin by proposing a model which encapsulates one of the key Chinese cultural values – Collectivism – and then use this model to evaluate key features of the WeChat application.

This paper serves as the first step of the research process by building the model and providing a preliminary implementation of it. The paper is structured as follows. Firstly we examine WeChat and Chinese cultural values and present our proposed research model. Next we apply our proposed

model to a social media platform called WeChat. Finally we conclude with our limitations and suggestions for future work.

2 Social Media and WeChat

2.1 Social Media

Social media provides a platform for different social groups and communicate and exchange information (Cao, Lu, Dong, Tang, & Li, 2013). SNS is defined as a web-based software application that helps users to connect and socialize with friends, family members, business partners or other individuals (Gnyawali, Fan, & Penner, 2010). Features and functionality designed into social media affect how users interact, coordinate and form relationship networks (McKenna, Vodanovich, & Fan, 2016).

There are different types of social media platforms, which provide businesses with many types of interactive communication methods (Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman, & Bezawada, 2013). Social media, text and instant messaging applications, blogs, wikis and other web forums are growing as a means of supporting additional, often critical and accurate information within the public sphere (Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008). Social media provides a platform that allows users to communicate news and information to others as an alternative form of communication such as television, radio, and print (McKenna et al., 2016).

2.2 WeChat

Chinese use of social media is increasing faster than the rest of the world. Chinese consumers tend to consider products or services if they see them mentioned on a social media site. Because social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are blocked in China (Lien & Cao, 2014), WeChat is one that marketers could use to directly communicate with their Chinese audience. WeChat is the most widely used social networking service in China and has become an important social media platform for computer-mediated communication (Gao & Zhang, 2013).

The WeChat messaging application is developed by Tencent in China. It is reported that WeChat now delivers more than 1 billion messages per day and that WeChat has attracted more than 700 million users within 2 years of its initial launch (Custer, 2016). WeChat includes regular communication features such as text messages, voice messages, audio and video calls, and chat groups; common SNS features such as friending, posts/comments, Moments (like Facebook news- feed); and novel social features such as Shake, People Nearby, Subscribe, Red Packet, amongst others. The Great Firewall of China (Bamman, O'Connor, & Smith, 2012; Deibert, Palfrey, Rohozinski, Zittrain, & Stein, 2008) plays an inherent part of the WeChat functionality. Similar to practices on Weibo, Baidu and other social media, WeChat reserves the right to restrict particular search terms and deletes messages, threads and groups that contravene strict Chinese protocol (Bamman et al., 2012).

3 Chinese Values in a Social Context

Traditionally speaking, Eastern cultures such as China, are collectivistic. They value family, friends and their groups over self. Members of Eastern cultures tend to have fewer, closer and more enduring friendships than members of Western cultures. Collectivism in Asian societies is maintained through a general value placed on social obligations and commitments (Li & Wright, 2000; Noronha, 2002) and familial ties (Sui Pheng & Leong, 2001).

While, Hofstede, and Trompenaars, have their critics (with Trompenaars significantly criticised by Hofstede) (see (Froholdt & Knudsen, 2007; Michael D Myers & Tan, 2003)). Criticisms are mainly focused around the fact that that there is no such thing as a 'national' cultural identity, and that the cultural dimensions are formulated from a Western perspective. There is however, many countries where the major cultural group is such a dominating factor that, nationally, cultural values do have a national cultural identity, albeit with cultural sub-groups within that national identity. With regard to Hofstede and Trompenaars having a Western viewpoint, in the words of Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars themselves (1997, p. 149): "...social science methodology is not (emphasis added) culture free. There is no neutral point 'above' culture from which to view the universe. It follows that many different ways of viewing culture are legitimate" We look beyond these critics and evaluate Chinese values of collectivism in cultural dimensions which may bring valuable insights in terms of explaining behaviours, in particular the designers' perspective, which has been largely overlooked.

Subsequently, this section is going to develop a framework that assembles Chinese cultural attributes and centralising Chinese collectivistic culture, this is based primarily on Hofstede's (Hofstede & Bond, 1984; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) work. This framework helps to explain the various interrelated cultural attributes that inherent in the design of Chinese social media platform.

The social hierarchy as a result of the high power distance in China (Hofstede & Bond, 1984) leads to a strong respect for authority which is evident among Chinese daily practices (Yau, 1988). In a group orientated society, the social hierarchy and respect for authority of the interpersonal relations and the society (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Moise, 2013) is paramount. This cultural value has been largely involved with other cultural values in the discussion of interpersonal relationship in the Chinese context.

Guanxi as a Chinese cultural value has been broadly discussed in the investigations of Chinese interpersonal relationships in business, society and organization (Buttery & Wong, 1999; Wong & Chan, 1999; Wong & Tam, 2000). This attribute also is a key cultural factor that determines Chinese interpersonal behavior. To build up and maintain a good 'guanxi' helps to achieve positive group dynamics and strengthen social ties.

Compared with other cultural values, the value of keqi tends to provide a guideline of practice in interpersonal relationships. 'keqi', refer to 'well-manner politeness' (Yao, 1983), which is a personal attribute as well as an embodiment of harmony in Chinese communication to keep a courteous distance with an acquaintance. Chen (Chen, 2013) argues that the keqi way of communication is the way to sustain the harmonious relationship.

4   Research Methodology

This paper is framed within the methodological stance of a case study (Miles & Huberman, 1994) which is useful for investigating contemporary phenomena and their context (M. D Myers, 2013; Yin, 2015). The proposed model in this article (Figure 1) is adapted from two existing models (Mok & De-Franco, 2000; Yau, 1988). This is the starting point of this research, this model centralizes the concept of collectivism and suggests a lens from which Chinese culture values can be understood in terms of specific cultural attributes of keqi, guanxi, and respect for authority. These three notions understand the collectivism from interpersonal relations, social hierarchy and harmony-maintenances. This model is designed to be used to provide an understanding of the cultural values inherent in the design of Chinese social media platform.

The first step of the research process is presented in the next section, where the authors analyse existing features of WeChat alongside Chinese cultural values. This model can then be used to further explore the design of the WeChat application. Data will be collected through interviews with designers and developers of WeChat. We will employ a snowballing interview technique which is common in qualitative research (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). One of the key problems of snowballing as identified by Biernacki and Waldorf is finding participants and starting a referral chain. We can overcome this problem because one of the authors has personal connections to employees at Tencent (the creators of WeChat). A second problem is the verifying of potential respondents. This problem can be solved by asking the respondents to only refer other participants for interview if they meet the research criteria we have designed. The interview questions will be based on the cultural elements discussed earlier and presented in Figure 1 within the context of application design. We aim to have at least 5 interviews, and will continue interviewing until saturation has been reached, should more participants be available.
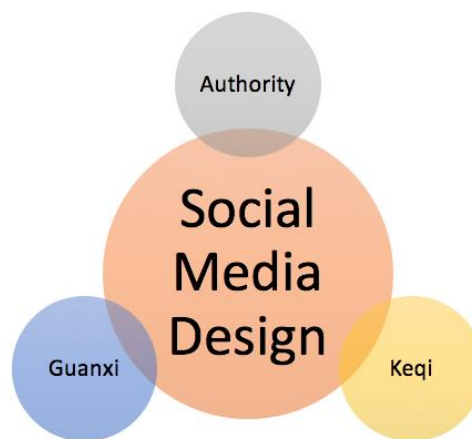

Figure 1.   Chinese Cultural Value Model

To triangulate (M. D Myers, 2013) the data collected from our interviews, we will also consult documentary sources such as design specifications and screenshots of the WeChat design. All data will be collected in Chinese and translated into English by the Chinese speaking author. Data Analysis will use thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2009) to identify common themes and ideas emerging from the data.

5   Preliminary Results

In this section, we present preliminary results from our analysis of WeChat features, which are based on the Chinese culture elements presented above, and the proposed model in Figure 1. This will help us formulate a basis for our interviews with designers and users of this platform in the next step of the research.

WeChat Feature	Respect for Authority	Guanxi	Keqi
Shake (Chatting with random users who shaking their phones at the same time)		✓	
People Nearby		✓	

Subscribe to celebrities or newsletters	✓		
Red Packet (money transactions)		✓	
Moments (Social Networking Functions)			✓

Table 1.   Features and Cultural Attributes

A feature that demonstrates the cultural attribute of Respect for Authority is the Subscribe functionality which enables users to subscribe to a celebrity or to newsletters. The owner of the account has the absolute right to choose and decide what comments to put on under the post. In addition, the creator of a chat group who assembles the group chat has the power to dissolve group, whilst other chat group members can only join or exit the chat group.

The Chinese cultural attribute of guanxi can include both the creation of new ties as well as the strengthening of existing ties with people. This attribute is reflected in the features of Shake and People Nearby which spontaneously match people with strangers virtually. Through this feature, WeChat allows people to form instrumental ties with strangers. In addition, Holmes, Balnaves, and Wang (2015) explore the recently introduced feature, Red Packet. This feature digitally imitates the Chinese Lunar New Year tradition of 'hong bao' where elders pass money to the young to encourage prosperity and provide good blessings. The red bags themselves imply a range of expectations that do not need to be made explicit. Unlike the tradition of senior people giving to junior people, the WeChat feature encourages people to give money to anyone. Thus this feature is a way to strengthen or build up social ties – another demonstration of guanxi.

And finally, the nuanced design of moments within WeChat emulates the concept of keqi. For example, while one can post images and links for all of their friends to see and comment on, the comments are only visible if the commentators are friends with each other. This features enables the appearance of "well-mannered politeness" by not allowing acquaintances to necessarily see each other's comments. The need for privacy which is encapsulated in the attribute of keqi is further seen in the ability of WeChat users to restrict broadcasts to specific users.

The current design of WeChat affords the practices of these three key cultural attributes – Respect for Authority, guanxi and keqi. Hsu (Hsu, 1985) emphasizes that Chinese are social and psychologically dependent on others and have a strong group orientation; therefore, individualistic behaviour is regarded as an expense to others. For example a number of WeChat features such as Go Dutch and Group Buy further reflects this group orientation.

6   Conclusion

Research on social media platform design presents interesting opportunities to examine how platform designers can structure and influence user interaction in particular ways (Aral et al., 2013). This research can help shed light on cross-cultural differences related to social media design and will be of great value to social platform designers who are pursuing a mobility strategy targeted to a global audience. Culture is often reflected by or perceived through shared practices in a community (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010; Geertz, 1973; Hofstede, 2001). Cultural differences influence communication, behaviour, and values. Asian-based social media tend to have tighter so-

cial relationships, with their practices reflecting an indirect communication style and less open self-disclosure; whereas, western based social media tend to have wider social networks, with their practices reflecting a more direct communication style and bolder self-disclosure (Cho, Jung, & Park, 2013).

While social media platforms like WeChat have a potential to modernize elements of Chinese culture, they simultaneously act as a vehicle for the reinforcement of traditional Chinese collectivist cultural values (Holmes et al., 2015). We have demonstrated in this paper how a particular social media platform, WeChat, reflects the broader shared cultural values inherent in Chinese society. Our findings do not imply that other cultures other than Chinese are unsuited for using WeChat, as the application is now becoming popular outside of China. However, as it is developed in China, there are Chinese cultural values inherent in its design. Additionally, many of its features are not available outside China. A future part of our larger study will analyse and contrast social media designs from other cultures, for example Whatsapp and Facebook, in contrast to Wechat and Weibo. However, this paper only includes the Chinese cultural aspect.

This paper has two key limitations; 1) the model proposed in this paper is conceptual and has not been thoroughly validated. Validation could be to carry out via an exploratory study including interviews and focus groups with the designers, developers and marketers of Chinese social media platforms such as Tencent (the creators of WeChat) and Sina (creators of Weibo). This type of study would help us to understand the motivations for the creation of features within each platform. In addition, interviews with users of these platforms would help to determine whether or not these features help engender the cultural attributes discussed in the model. 2) In this paper we focus exclusively on the concept of collectivism, however in doing so we may overlook other important values in the Chinese culture such as the concept of Harmony (Wei & Li, 2013). In future research we could extend this study to include other concepts of Chinese culture.

In addition, we think it will be useful to explore other nuanced Chinese social media such as RenRen, Weibo and QQ side by side. Additionally, Moreover, we are witnessing a common social media lifecycle emerging, which can be compared to traditional product adoption and product life cycle theory (Rogers, 1976). A social media platform is developed and eventually launched; it grows, and at some point will peter out unless it innovates (Cox, 1967; Torkjazi, Rejaie, & Willinger, 2009). Aral et al. (2013) suggest that by thinking deeply about platform design platform designers have an opportunity to consider add-on features and other forms of innovation to extend a platforms functionality and usability. In its relatively short history WeChat has been able to adapt and alter their life cycle through innovation. This provides an exciting avenue of future research in to the Social Media Lifecycle.

7   References

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