Examining WeChat users' motivations, trust, attitudes, and positive word-of-mouth: Evidence from China

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ABSTRACT

WeChat is a mobile instant text and voice messaging communication service and has become an important social media platform in China. The objectives of this article are to examine the effects of psychological motivations (entertainment, sociality, and information) and trust on WeChat users' attitudes and to assess the influence of users' attitudes and their trust on positive word-of-mouth. This study represents one of the few that empirically investigates WeChat users' motives, attitudes, trust, and their associated behavior. The research model was tested using data randomly collected from the database of Sojump. The numbers of valid observations were 264. Structure equation modeling was employed to verify and validate the research model. The outcomes confirm the path effects showing that entertainment, sociality, information, and trust positively influence WeChat users' attitudes and users' trust and their attitudes significantly affect positive WOM. The research results provide insight into how WeChat can motivate users and build their trust to improve their attitudes which in turn will increase WeChat users' willingness in making positive comments on products and services.

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1. Introduction

Social media has deeply changed interpersonal communication. Instant messaging (IM) is a social media tool offering real-time text transmission over the Internet. In the past few years, IM has gained popularity as a means of effective and efficient communication. IM is particularly attractive to younger generations because it permits users to instantly obtain and share information with a list of their online "buddies" (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010).

WeChat (WeiXin in Chinese) is a mobile instant text and voice messaging communication service developed by Tencent Holdings Ltd. in China on January 21, 2011. WeChat has similar features to WhatsApp to generate both text and voice messages. WeChat is free to install, use, and download, and supports all smartphone platforms including iPhone, Android, and Windows Phone operating systems. For WeChat users, sending and receiving messaging between different mobile platforms is possible. WeChat provides users an innovative way to communicate and interact with friends through text messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, one-to-many messaging, photo/video sharing, location sharing, and contact information exchange (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WeChat).

With the advances in Internet connection and the popularity of smart phone, WeChat reached 355 million monthly active users at the end of 2013 and is available in over 200 countries and supports 18 different languages (Tencent 2013 Fourth Quarter and Annual Results Announcement). The monthly active users refer to the total number of WeChat users sending out at least one message during the last calendar month prior to the relevant date (Tencent 2013 Fourth Quarter and Annual Results Announcement). Consumer activities in WeChat range from socializing with friends and entertaining to exchanging information and experiences regarding a product/service. 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).

China's 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 (http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/08/segmenting-chinas-social-media/). Because social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are blocked in China, WeChat is one that marketers could use to directly communicate with their Chinese audience.

Psychological motivations are the key in determining social media users' attitudes (Chang & Zhu, 2011). Inspecting users' psychological needs help marketers understand what motivates people to use the media. A review of the literature reveals that the

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previous social media studies mainly focused on examining users' motivations and their attitudes regarding adopting Facebook, Ren-Ren, or other social networking sites (SNS) (Chang & Zhu, 2011; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011). Little research investigates WeChat users' psychological motivations and their attitudes.

The significance of word-of-mouth (WOM) communications in influencing consumer decision making is well documented (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). Word-of-mouth behavior within SNS is originated from the users' desire to maintain social relationships within their personal networks (Chu & Kim, 2011). A positive WOM provides beneficial information about a product/service to customers and thereby assist the promotion of the product/service (Maxham, 2001). In the growing online social communications, electronic WOM has been an important topic to business and marketing researchers (Chu & Choi, 2011). Trust facilitates a person's confidence and his/her willingness to have faith in the other party (Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992) and is a driver of WOM (Chu & Kim, 2011) and attitude (Shin, 2010). Although trust has been widely discussed in the marketing literature, very few empirical studies explore the impact of trust on attitudes and positive WOM communication in social media like WeChat.

Based on the foregoing discussions, the objectives of this research are to examine the effects of WeChat users' psychological motivations and trust on attitudes and to assess the influence of users' attitudes and trust on positive WOM.

To investigate users' psychological motivations underlying WeChat usage, this study employs uses and gratifications (U&G) theory. U&G theory provides a conceptual framework in examining new media adoption (Kim et al., 2011) and is applicable to various situations involving mediated communications which includes traditional (e.g., newspapers) and non-traditional (e.g., Internet) media (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005).

This article is organized as follows. In the subsequent sessions, we review the literature and develop the hypotheses. We then summarize the research methodology, and report the results. Finally, we conclude with discussions.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Motivations for using WeChat and attitude

Uses and gratifications theory was developed based on social and psychological origins of needs and is one of the influential theories in media research (Roy, 2009). U&G theory assumes that media users are active in their underlying motivations (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) and explains that people purposely choose certain media in order to gratify their psychological needs (Kim et al., 2011). This theory provides insight into the meaning and determinants of consumer behaviors such as attitude to the media (Luo, 2002). Adapted from Chang and Zhu (2011), this study defines the attitude towards WeChat as an individual's summative evaluation (positive or negative) of perceived attributes of WeChat. Attitudes are experienced and learned and they might develop over a period of time. Attitudes put consumers into a frame of mind of liking or disliking the products/services. Attitudes might differ from one another in terms of their strength. From the marketer's perspective, although attitudes are usually slow to change, they can be influenced through marketing communications, e.g., advertisements, or gratifying their psychological motives (Kim et al., 2011).

The evolution of information technology supports the high level of interactivity and stimulates the rapid growth of the Internet. Thus the Internet gradually replaces traditional mass media in communication (Roy, 2009). The previous research identified the important motivations underlying the use of the Internet including information, convenience, entertainment, and social interaction

(Ko et al., 2005). Luo's (2002) study of online consumer behavior indicated that entertainment and information are positively associated with attitudes toward the Web. In the era of social media, several scholars have applied the U&G approach to discover the psychological motivations of using social networking sites (Chang & Zhu, 2011; Chung & Austria, 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006; Kim et al., 2011; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Sun, Liu, Peng, Y., & Barnes, 2014).

Chang and Zhu (2011) compared the differences between the pre-adopters and post-adopters on social networking sites in China and found information, meeting new friends, and conformity motivations have the same significant, positive effect on attitudes for both groups. However, entertainment motivation has a significant, positive effect on attitudes in the group of pre-adopters and connecting with old friends has a significant, positive influence on the post-adopters' attitudes only. In addition, Chang and Zhu (2011) reviewed the previous SNS studies and discovered that sociality and entertainment are the two dominant motivations to adopt SNS and the third one is information motivation. For ease of classification, Chang and Zhu (2011) merged two motivations, connecting with old friends and meeting new people, into one motivation namely sociality. In the research investigating gratifications underlying social media usage, Chung and Austria (2010) viewed social media usage derived from entertainment, social interaction, and information gratification and found social interaction and information gratification have a positive relationship to attitudes toward social media marketing messages. Ellison et al. (2006) noted that information, sociality, entertainment, and conformity are the chief motivations of American students in using Facebook. Kim et al. (2011) examined the motives of using SNS among college students in the US and Korea and the outcomes showed that the motives of seeking friends, entertainment, and convenience have a significant, positive influence on US students' attitudes toward the SNS. The motives of seeking social support and convenience have a significant, positive effect on Korean students' attitudes toward adopting SNS. However, the impact of seeking information on attitudes toward adopting SNS is not significant in both countries. Due to social and cultural differences, Kim et al. (2011) suggested that SNS users in different countries have different motives of adopting SNS. Park et al. (2009) investigated Facebook Groups users' gratifications and identified four needs for using Facebook Groups: socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information. In a study of exploring Chinese users' continuance intention in online social networks, Sun et al. (2014) discussed users seeking useful information as one psychological motive of Chinese SNS users.

The previous discussions show that entertainment, sociality, and information are the most frequently discussed motives of using Internet and SNS. Thus, this study proposes that entertainment, sociality, and information are important motivations of Chinese users in adopting WeChat and they are the determinants of Chinese users' attitudes. People who have high entertainment, information, and sociality motivations are more likely to adopt WeChat.

Referencing the definitions of entertainment, sociality, and information from the previous studies (Chang & Zhu, 2011; Luo, 2002; Park et al., 2009), our research defines entertainment as the extent to which WeChat is fun and entertaining to its users. Information refers to the extent to which WeChat provides users with resourceful, timely, and convenient information. Sociality is defined as individuals interested in connecting with old friends, keeping relationships with existing friends, and meeting new people through WeChat. Hence, this study hypothesizes:

H1. Entertainment has a positive influence on attitudes toward the use of WeChat.