Applications of Mobile Social Media: WeChat Among Academic Libraries in China

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abstract

This paper describes the application of the social media platform WeChat. It explores the use of this emerging mobile app using the official WeChat accounts of the top 39 academic libraries in China. The findings indicate that approximately one third of the libraries use WeChat as a marketing tool to promote collections and services for users. Most of the 39 libraries, however, are still using the most basic functions. Advanced functions urgently need to be adopted. The main uses of WeChat are general social networking services (SNSs) and automatic answering and interaction features, which include seeking and sharing information, user self-service, and keyword-identified reference auto-responders. The study uses six aspects of quality to evaluate the interaction and content delivered by WeChat. These include the volume of information, information content quality, concordance rate, frequency, self-service, and basic features. The experience of Chinese university libraries is used to provide recommendations for other libraries.

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INTRODUCTION

The advancement of mobile network speed and wireless network coverage has increased the popularity of smartphones, tablets, and other mobile intelligent terminals among Chinese academic library users. The dominant application (App) in China is the mobile social medium WeChat (or Weixin in Chinese—for more details see http://www.wechat.com/en/). In China, the App boasts 271.9 million active monthly users, an increase of 15.3% QoQ or 124.3% YoY (Tencent, 2013). Launched in January 2011 by Tencent™—whose products include official WeChat accounts, PC desktop instant messaging client-QQ, Q-zone, Twitter-like microblogging platform Weibo, and mail services—WeChat offers a free instant messaging application service for smartphones and enables voice, text, pictures, videos, and location information exchange via mobile phone. It is also a platform to transmit real-time voice intercom, video calls, group chat, and post pictures on the WeChat activity timeline (Moments), which, like Facebook, allows users to share photos and updates with their contacts, publish status updates with illustrations, or other content such as comments and retweets or forwarding. Since its launch, WeChat has rapidly become an integral part of everyday life (Skuse, A. for CNN, 2014).

This study examines WeChat official accounts, a new functional module for WeChat. Libraries, universities, governments, and companies can freely apply to establish official WeChat accounts. Previous studies primarily focused on the application of Web2.0 technologies and social media websites in libraries. This study investigates emerging social media tools, specifically WeChat, and their application in the top 39 university libraries in China and identifies the functions applied in these libraries, their interaction with users on WeChat, content classification, self-service features, and quality appraisal when using the App. This study presents the prospect of applying WeChat in libraries, and promotes its use in library services to facilitate the use of library resources.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

This study identifies how WeChat is applied in the top 39 Chinese academic libraries, to examine the level of application, to describe the characteristics of application, and to provide practical advice and detailed examples. The authors consider this process important in the final formulation of guidelines for libraries and librarians in building and managing a WeChat presence.

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To achieve these objectives, the study answers the following questions:

- Which libraries have applied for an official WeChat account?
- How do academic libraries apply WeChat, and what potential issues have emerged from the practice?
- Is the quality of WeChat’s application in libraries of a sufficient standard?

BACKGROUND

WeChat, the popular instant-messaging App created by China’s largest Internet Company, Tencent, provides a new way to connect with friends across platforms. Its features include chatting with friends in live chat sessions, group chat, video calls, voice chat, Moments (a timeline where users can “like” or “comment”), look around, and games (WeChat, 2013). Users can receive different services and information by following official WeChat accounts for reading, replying, storage, sharing, and re-tweeting. WeChat official accounts are categorized as service accounts that send a text message or illustrated information monthly and subscription accounts that can push a group or single information with illustrations daily. General information on WeChat official accounts includes WeChat official account names, WeChat ID, logo, introduction, verified accounts, view history, receive messages, message, and an “unfollow” button. Some of these elements are important in attracting users’ attention, and are highlighted when libraries or other users apply for official WeChat accounts. “Introduction” briefly describes functions to users so that they can understand the App’s general features and services before following the account. “Verified Accounts” are those authenticated by Tencent. To apply for certification, an account must have at least 500 followers. After subscribing, the user can access all push information in “view history”—from the first message published, not just from when the user started following the account. The “receive messages” button enables users to block messages they do not want to receive. This function no longer sends reminders, but can be located in “view history.” All records, including reference information, one-to-many information, and all system auto-response messages can be retrieved.

WeChat is an efficient tool in libraries. Generally, libraries publish notices on their websites regarding established services to inform users of features, services, tips, and following methods (scanning a QR code, searching by name or ID). A welcome, recommendations, and contact information (e.g., telephone number) are also included to promote and facilitate better use of WeChat. When following the library official account, users automatically receive a custom message and the equivalent first push information—“welcome message” or “automatic greeting”—by subscription. The first one-to-many message also includes information on the platform’s capabilities, such as greetings, functions, contact information, and navigation services. Here, the “navigation service” describes the scope of self-inquiry information and self-services functions, and the keywords, letters, or numbers to be entered to obtain information, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mobile social media enables users to maintain and foster social connections with members of a social network. Moreover, they can conduct real-time communication anytime, anywhere via a portable mobile device enabling the inexpensive exchange of text, video calls, and voice chats. Social media are also easily accessible and immediate because the user always has the mobile device. Essentially, mobile social media services provide an “always-on” environment for information exchange among members of social networks. This concept draws on Counts and Fisher’s (2010) definition of mobile social networks. In recent decades, technological developments have led to a global social media revolution, which has led to the advancement of many social networking services (SNSs). WeChat is an instant messaging (IM) and SNS platform, enabling interactive exchange through mobile devices, so-called mobile social media.

Today, the use of social media in libraries is widespread (Jahan & Ahmed, 2012; Kim & Abbas, 2010; Linh, 2008; Si, Shi, & Chen, 2011). Studies demonstrate that some university library digital resources and services are fully utilized and developed through social media tools (Harinarayana & Raju, 2010; Liu, 2008). Numerous studies indicate the benefits of social media in reference services and promoting library resources and services, and that librarians view the new technology positively. Social media is also reported to aid library staff in keeping up-to-date with resources and activities in their profession (Chu & Du, 2013). Some researchers have noted that challenges and obstacles in the process of using social media tools (Arif & Mahmood, 2012; Chu & Du, 2013), while other studies investigate the use of social media websites in libraries (Ayu & Abrizah, 2011; Chua & Goh, 2010; Mansor & Idris, 2010).

Bhatti and Amjad (2013) identified the frequency and purposes of using social media websites—Twitter, Wikis, Blogs, Flicker, MySpace, Tags, Instant messenger, LinkedIn, Delicious, and Stumbleupon—among library and information studies (LIS) students at the Islamabad University of Bahawalpur. Hughes (2013) predicted the growth of social media tools in academia. Tay, Glass, and Chew (2013) implemented the use of Foursquare, a location based services (LBS) App that can engage users and promote library activities and events (Tay et al., 2013). Librarians at Boise State University and Oregon State University formulated treks and challenges using SCVNGR4 for library orientation and

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4 SCVNGR is a game-based geolocation application where users can earn points or gain rewards by completing challenges and treks. Builders design questions that involve text based answers (open ended or multiple choices), QR codes, or photo challenges.
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