An experimental study of Chinese tourists using a company-hosted WeChat official account

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A B S T R A C T

Company-hosted *WeChat official accounts* (WOA) have emerged as a commonly-used marketing channel recently. The relationship between user motivations and behaviors in WOA need to be explored. This study distinguishes between consumers hedonic and utilitarian motivations for using travel agency-hosted WOA, and empirically investigates the influence of WeChat user motives and trust on usage behaviors and *word-of-mouth* (WOM) intentions. Structural equation modeling was employed to analyze the relationships among motivation, behavior, trust and WOM. The results show that utilitarian motivation has a significant effect on consumer participation behavior which obviously impacts the user's WOM intention. Furthermore, the outcomes also indicate that trust affects user participation behavior and WOM intention significantly. The findings provide theoretical insights into consumer behavior in social media and contribute to managerial implications for practitioners.

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1. Introduction

According to a WeChat report in 2016 (Tencent, 2016), WeChat's monthly active users have reached 650 million. *WeChat official accounts* (WOA) have become one of the main services provides. Governments, companies and organizations can freely apply to establish a WOA. The number of WOAs is more than 10 million, and 72% of them are from enterprises and organizations. Nearly 80% of WeChat users have been following the WOA, which has become an important way to obtain information for users. As for the purposes of adopting the platform, 74.2% of the users intend to obtain information, 41.9% are for business, and 30.9% are for specific services (Tencent, 2016).

In the tourism field, WOA has become one of the most important data platform in the *Internet plus tourism model* in China (CNTA, 2015), and is the most popular marketing tool for the tourism industry. More and more travel agencies are taking advantage of WOA for marketing promotion for products and services by pushing information out to the public. WOA, as a result, has also become one of the important channels for tourists to obtain information on products, services and prices.

Why do consumers follow travel agency-hosted WOAs, and how do they become fans, purchasers and WOM disseminators? This is an important problem for practitioners. However, despite plentiful research on social media such as Twitter and Facebook, no sound theories exist that enhance our understanding of what motivates consumers to use company-hosted WOA, in the light of WeChat being not only a social media platform, but also a life services platform. The recent research has rarely delved deeply into the relationship between motivation and behavior for WeChat usage. So the objectives of this research are to examine the influence of the travel agency-hosted WOA user motivation and trust on participation behavior, and to assess the effects of participation behavior and trust on WOM intention.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1. Social media and WeChat

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define *social media* as "an application software that allows users to generate and exchange content basing on the Web2.0 technology." Social media can be categorized as social network sites (Facebook, MySpace), users sharing platform (YouTube, Flickr), user-generated content platforms (Wikipedia), log and microblog (travel blog, Twitter, Weibo),

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Table 1
Related research on social media.

Author	Context	Content	Findings
Kwok and Yu (2013)	Facebook	Behavioral intention	Divide the Facebook message into four categories: text, picture, video and URL
Pöyry et al. (2013)	Facebook	Motivation, behavioral intention	Distinguish the hedonic and utilitarian motivations
Kang et al. (2014)	Facebook	Behavioral intention	Members more likely to visit restaurant Facebook fan pages when they obtain social–psychological and hedonic benefits from pages
Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008)	MySpace, Facebook	Motivation	Many college students using these friend-networking sites and for usage and gratifications purposes
Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012)	Facebook	Motivation	Need to belong and self-presentation are primary needs
Debatin et al. (2009)	Facebook	Attitude, behavior	Lax attitude may be based on high gratification, usage patterns, and a psychological mechanism similar to third-person effect
Ellison et al. (2007)	Facebook	Usage purpose	Facebook usage was found to interact with measures of psychological well-being, providing greater benefits for users experiencing low self-esteem and low life satisfaction
Glynn et al. (2012)	Facebook	Usage purpose	News use is still a minor component of overall social network site activity. Gender and life satisfaction have a significant impact on how Facebook is used for news-related purposes
Junco (2012)	Facebook	Usage purpose	Time spent on Facebook was significantly negatively related to overall grade point average. Using Facebook for collecting and sharing information predicted the outcome variables while using Facebook for socializing was negatively predictive
Wu and Lo (2014)	Facebook	Usage purpose, behavioral Intention	Tie strength correlated with participation behavior; positive emotions positively correlated with participating behaviors
Sotiriadis and Van Zyl (2013)	Twitter	WOM	Credibility, involvement, and expertise will influence the twitter followers' behaviors
Chu and Sung (2015)	Twitter	WOM	Those who most heavily use Twitter and follow many brands are most likely to tweet brands
Che and Cao (2014)	WeChat	Motivation, WOM	Hedonic, sociability, informality and trust can affect attitudes and positive word of mouth

instant message (WhatsApp, Tencent, QQ), and online communities (TripAdvisor, Golden Forum) (Lo et al., 2011; Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Sotiriadis and Van Zyl, 2013). The popular instant messaging application and social network site platform created by Tencent in China, WeChat, integrates multiple functions, such as instant messaging, social networking, user-generated content hosting, and information sharing (Xu et al., 2015). WeChat is a mobile social media that provides users with an innovative way to communicate via functions that include chatting with friends in live chat sessions, group chats, video calls, and interactive online games (Che and Cao, 2014). As a new functional module, WOAs are categorized as service accounts and subscription accounts, service accounts that can send a text message or illustrated information monthly, and subscription accounts that can push a group or single information with illustrations daily (Xu et al., 2015).

2.2. Hedonic and utilitarian motivations

Babin et al. (1994) argued that consumption behavior has the perceived value of an interactive experience, including *utilitarian experience value* which embodied in reaching the goal of purchase through purchasing behavior, and *hedonic experienced value* reflected in enjoyable feelings generated during consumption activities. Batra and Ahtola (1991) also noted that consumers can obtain functional and experiential benefits through consumption. Other studies have shown that hedonic motivations are concerned with fun, playfulness, enjoyment, and entertainment experiences, while utilitarian motivations are goal-oriented rational behavior (Babin et al., 1994; Batra and Ahtola, 1991). Hedonic and utilitarian motivations will influence online consumption behavior (Cotte et al., 2006; Hartman et al., 2006). Pöyry et al., (2013) argued that user attention and the use of social media are mainly based on both hedonic and utilitarian motivations. They examined the relationship between users' hedonic and utilitarian motivations for visiting travel agency-hosted Facebook community pages and their usage, and found that customers are able to browse the web, search for information, give likes, do forwarding and commenting, giving recommendations, and making purchases. Hedonic motivation is more likely to promote community participation for users, while

utilitarian motivation encourages users to browse the website more. Relevant studies on social media are shown in Table 1.

Although there has been a lot of research on social media, there has not been much focus on WeChat. Che and Cao (2014) analyzed WeChat users' using motivation. They found that hedonic intention, sociability, information, and trust have effects on user attitudes and WOM (Che and Cao, 2014). Xu et al. (2015) explored the use of WOA for the top 39 academic libraries in China, and found that 33% use WeChat as a marketing tool. They further noted that the main uses of WeChat are for social networking services, and automatic answering and interaction features, which include seeking and sharing information, user self-service, and keyword-identified reference auto-responders (Xu et al., 2015).

Based on the conclusions drawn from Cotte et al. (2006) and Pöyry et al. (2013) about the motivation and behavior of users following and participating in brand community interaction, users may be interested in travel agencies' WOA based on their hedonic and utilitarian motivation. Information and creative interaction provided by WOA can meet user needs. Hedonic motivation may promote the user to participate in brand interaction or communicate with other users. Utilitarian motivation, in contrast, promotes user concerns about useful information and preferential activities. Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

- **Hypothesis 1 (The Hedonic Motivation and Participation Hypothesis):** *Hedonic motivation is positively related to participation behavior*
- **Hypothesis 2 (The Utilitarian Motivation and Participation Hypothesis):** *Utilitarian motivation is positively related to participation behavior*

2.3. Online travel community and user participation behavior

Consumers like to check out other people's consumption experience-related information or ask for advice before making a purchase decision (Casaló et al., 2010). The network environment offers convenience, synchronization, timeliness, durability, and so on, which have attracted a large number of consumers to obtain or give advice online (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). Tourism is an