How Wechat Affects the Way People Make Friends

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Abstract. This paper aims to study how Wechat affects the way people make friends, by adopting the structure of a multiple, single and Likert-scale five-point measure questionnaire. 68 participants joined the research and 66 are effective results. The results indicate that 1) people connect and communicate with their real-world friends via Wechat; 2) few people are forming friendships with strangers via Wechat and this type of online friendship is unstable and is of low-quality; 3) Wechat is gradually replacing the traditional way of making friends with the fast and digital way. However, Wechat’s effectiveness in maintaining friendship is limited while the traditional way still prevails.

Introduction

Wechat (literally: micro message) is a smartphone-based instant messaging app developed by Tencent in 2011. Wechat was first created as a cross-platform instant messaging app. Users with Wechat on their smartphones can send text messages, voice messages, pictures and sight (a kind of short-length videos) to their Wechat friends (contacts). Besides this, users can network and connect with friends on Wechat using several features, such as Moments (users post their personal emotion status or favorite music to it) and Linkedin connection (users can relate their Linkedin account to their Wechat account).

According to the Annual report of Tencent in 2015, “For Weixin and WeChat together, MAU (Monthly Active Users) reached 697 million at the end of 2015, representing year-on-year growth of 39%.”[1] The MAU (Monthly Active Users) of Wechat reaches nearly half of the Chinese population, and roughly half of the MAU (Monthly Active Users) of Facebook Worldwide (Facebook’s Monthly active users were 1.59 billion as of December 31, 2015, an increase of 14% year-over-year).[2] This amount of users makes Wechat unique in China, since Facebook is blocked by the Chinese Great Firewall which makes Wechat a “China-based” app, because there are not many foreigners using Wechat. The social networking and instant messaging app is a hot topic for researchers around the world.

The research regarding Wechat is mainly conducted by Chinese scholars in mainland China; the research covers a broad range of fields. In domestic education, a Chinese scholar found that, with the use of Wechat in middle school English teaching, the students can learn English more effectively because of the active engagement generated by Wechat[3], but without careful management, it can cause anxiety among students. Besides this, Wechat has not spread to every part of China. Xinyuan Wang published a book, The Social Media in Industrial China, and found out that Wechat is mainly a social media platform used by urban residents, with 93% of people in Chinese ‘first tier’ cities (Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou) using it, while in rural areas or small cities, only 26% of population use it.[4] This research shows that Wechat still needs to be improved to fulfill the needs of people living in rural areas. However, researchers rarely do research on the change that Wechat brought to the specific friendship-forming process.

This project is mainly about the effects Wechat has on the friendship-forming process. In this day and age, people, especially in China, heavily depend on Wechat. People communicate with their friends by sending Wechat text messages or voice messages, unlike in the past, when the phone call was the major way of communicating with friends. This is a more efficient and economical way of connecting friends because text messages and voice messages are almost free on Wechat. According to a work of Xinyuan Wang, he claims that various social media platforms connect people in some
extent but not as much as we speculate. He interviews a girl who comes from a rural area but now lives in an urban area in China. Although she has QQ (a social media platform like Wechat) account of the villagers and childhood friends, she doesn’t want to chat with them because they can’t find a common topic except for childhood memories.[5] The interview suggests that while social media apps have brought a huge impact on personal relationships, they are still not capable of eliminating barriers of making friends. This study has more concrete survey questions than Wang’s study, and the main focus is to study the behavior patterns of participants.

Towards this topic, there are 3 hypotheses. Firstly, the main function of Wechat is making and communicating with friends. Secondly, Wechat serves as a networking app. Third, people are open minded and willing to form friendships with strangers, and they are trustful of these new friends.

Methodology
The study was created to investigate the effects of making friends through Wechat. The survey was developed, which adopted single-choice questions, multiple-choices questions and Likert-scale questions. Meanwhile, in order to get more precise and close-to-real answers. The questionnaire has 12 questions and takes participants 5-8 minutes to answer (on average). The questionnaires were distributed online and by Wechat post at random. According to the results, the participants vary, including people from Taiwan, China and the US.

Results
Introduction
There are 68 participants in the research, and 66 participants finished the survey and provided effective results. The criteria of effective questionnaire: 1) All of the questions are answered. 2) There is no inconsistent answers. After filtering the invalid questionnaires, 66 left.

Descriptive Results
Q1. All of the participants use Wechat.
Q2. 94.0% of the participant choose the item “make friends”, followed by “entertain yourself”, with 68.18% of participant. More than a half of participants choose “Read news”, while only 25.76% of participants do business talk on Wechat and 3.03% sell products on Wechat.
Q3. According to this Likert-scale question, 77.27% of all participants agree to this statement that “The main function of Wechat is making friends and maintaining friendship.”(45.45% strongly agree to this statement), while 15.15% of the participants are neutral which means they neither agree nor disagree. Only 7.57% of participants disagree to this statement (3.03% strongly disagree to this agreement).
Q4. 93.94% of participants have friends most in their Wechat friends, the item “families” ranked second with 63.64%, followed by item “Co-workers and business partners” with 15.15%. The “strangers” and “others” take the least percentage, roughly 7.58%.
Q5. The results shows that, among the 66 participants, most of people (98.48%) add their real-world friends as their Wechat friends, and a small amount of participants (1.52%) refuse to add real-world friends as their Wechat friends.
Q6. The Wechat provides users to use 5 direct ways to add friends. Absolutely, users once used these ways to add friends. The graph vividly shows the frequency participants use these 5 ways. “Scan Quick Reaction code” is the mostly used way of connecting friends, which is used by 84.85% of participants, followed by “Search account directly”, with 77.27% participants uses. 43.94% of participants use “Other friends’ recommendation” to add friends, while few participants use “Search ‘People Nearby’” and “Shake” to add friends (3.03% and 3.03% separately).
Q7. 81.82% of the participants never use the “People Nearby” to make new friends, however, only 18.18% of participants use this way to make new friends once or more.
Q8. During the friendship-forming process, 65.15% of participants offer their Wechat account first while 34.85% of participants refuse to give their Wechat account first.
Q9. During the friendship-forming process, 68.18% of participants want to have the new friends’ Wechat account, and 31.82% of participants don’t.

Q10. More than half of the participants disagree with this statement (25.76% of participants strongly disagree with this statement (In order to maintain friendship, you will chat with friends on Wechat.) and 22.73% of participants disagree with the statement) while less than half of the participants support this statement (24.24%- agree and 16.67%- strongly agree). Less than 1/5 of the participants choose the neither agree nor disagree.

Q11. Based on the scenario of borrowing money. No participants chose offer the money immediately, while 59.09% of participants would refuse to offer the money under any circumstances. 49.91% of participants would choose to offer the money depending on different situations.

Discussions

According to Q2, the vast majority of people think “making friends” is the main function of Wechat, which corresponds to why it was created. Besides this, the entertaining and news-reading function are important. In the following Q3, with over 75% of positive attitude towards the basic function of Wechat, which is making friends, the results show that the majority of participants take Wechat as a social networking tool and this brand new tool would definitely influence the way people make friends. That is the foundation of the project because if Wechat is not used as a social networking tool to by majority of the users, the research would be less convincing.

1) People connect and communicate with their real-world friends via Wechat

From sequential questions (Q4-Q6 and Q10), the results shows that participants have most of their current friends in the real world (compared with the online world) as their Wechat friends. This makes Wechat a tool mainly used for connecting and communicating with their existing friends instead of a tool aiming to form new friendships. At the same time, it shows a characteristic of Wechat: it’s a comparatively private social networking app. This is because the Wechat account is the digital property of a user and users enjoy some degree of enclosure inside Wechat. People may post some personal feelings about themselves to certain groups rather than to the public. As time goes by, “the circle of friends” forms in Wechat--users would not like to add complete strangers as Wechat friends because they don’t want strangers to know them better. They post feelings or photos because they just want their friends to see it or comment on it. As one research shows, “WeChat represents a closed community that mainly consists of offline network (family, friends and colleagues at work), with little room for online strangers. Also, since the urban user’s online identity overlaps strongly with their offline identity, real names are widely accepted and applied.”[5]

2) Few people are forming friendship with strangers via Wechat and this type of online friendship is unstable and low-quality.

From question 7, 11, the results show that people’s behavioral and cognitive change in making friends with strangers. The “People Nearby” function enables users to see other users who are near him. The users can send greetings by Wechat and add nearby people as their friends but only when the specific person who receive the “friend request” agrees. Among the participants, only few people have used this function successfully to make friends (The survey doesn’t count those who have used this feature but failed to build connections with others as “Yes”). This reveals that participants (or the nearby people) are cautious about this feature, although there are small amounts of people using Wechat to build connections with total strangers but this does not reach consensus among most users.

Question 11 and 12 are designed to test the quality of new friendships formed on Wechat. The users’ attitude towards their Wechat friends varies in different settings and situations which means that users trust these new friends within a limit. When it comes to trip advice, most users tend to offer the advice. But when it comes to asking for help with a higher risk, like borrowing money, users would carefully evaluate the situation. As results corresponding to question 12 show, none of the participants chose to offer the money without hesitation, while 59.09% of participants would reject to help under any circumstances and 49.91% would like to know more about the situation.
The friendship with both physical and virtual contact enjoys better quality than the friendship that is formed virtually. In addition, when people initiatively using the “People Nearby” function to make new friends, they often make friends with a clear and specific goal. As a research shows, “people in Anshan Town seek out interactions with strangers for a wide variety of reasons: to ease boredom, to appear more popular to others, to pursue romantic relations, for sex and to meet people who share the same interests.”[6]

3) Wechat is gradually replacing the traditional way of making friends with the fast and digital way. However, Wechats effectiveness in maintaining friendships is limited while the traditional ways still prevail.

From question 8, 9 and 10, the result shows the Wechat plays an increasingly significant role in social networks. Generally speaking, asking for Wechat accounts symbolize the willingness to connect and befriend other people, as shown in results of Question 9 and 10. In the past centuries, people send out business card or leave phone number to the people that they want to connect. Nowadays, Wechat partially replaces the function of business cards and occasionally shows up in formal and informal social gatherings as a networking tool. As results show, more than half of people offer their Wechat account or want to have other’s Wechat account during the friendship-forming process. This shows how Wechat changes the way we make new friends. Wechat is less private than phone numbers but more intimate than emails, so when people really want to connect they would leave Wechat account to their friends instead of email address. In addition, Wechat helps people more easily to connect with the new friends because as most social networking app, it’s fast and convenient. However, Wechat is not the best tool to maintain friendship as the research shows. Nearly half of the participants deny the claim that Wechat is a good tool to maintain friendship. While only roughly 40% of participants take a positive attitude towards the claim. In terms of maintaining friendship, Wechat is not a perfect tool till now. As one of an interviewee said that physical contact cannot be ignored in any friendship, although Wechat makes communication easier. After all, Wechat is an online social networking tool, even people are addicted to it and utilize it to online chatting but face-to-face interaction is more intimate because people can see and engaging in talks with real people, this kind of physical feeling is what is missing in Wechat chatting.

The hypothesis of the project should be examined. The first hypothesis is proved to be correct. “The main function of Wechat is making friends and communicating with friends,” it can be confirmed by discussion. The second hypothesis is proved to be partially right, “Wechat serves as a networking app.” As the survey and discussion shows Wechat is becoming an important social networking tool at some extent but has not overturned the traditional ways. People still think Wechat is a more private social media platform than a public social networking tool. The third hypothesis is that people are open minded and willing to make strangers as their friends and they put much trust on these new friends. Although Wechat makes online friendship-forming simpler and partially help to eliminate people’s psychological barrier of making new friend, few people really make totally stranger as their friend because the Wechat facilitates enclosure within the users’ friend circle. If there is a Wechat-based new friend, people put much less trust on it comparing with the real-world friends.

Summary

In this day and age, Wechat changes our life, especially for the Chinese people. Our traditional way of communicating with friends was changed, and we tend to use the digital way more, like texting or sending voice message on Wechat instead of chatting on phones, but for now, most of people don’t think chatting with friends on Wechat can maintain friendship and face-to-face meeting should be involved if you want to keep a good relation with your friends.

The new friendship formed by Wechat is always low quality which means that people put much less trust on that comparing to the trust they put on the real world friends. But when it comes to social gatherings, Wechat is used as a networking tool, in this scenario, people are more willing to exchange their Wechat contact with “potential” friends (The people they want to befriend in the future).
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