

The Impact of WeChat Platform on Social Interaction Under the Perspective of Situational Theory

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Abstract. The new media environment will promote new interactions and relationships. This paper attempts to use the situation theory of media to explore the impact of the WeChat platform on social behavior and analyze the new communication scenes created by the WeChat platform, and the new communication scenes have changed the interaction behavior and communication relationship. These issues have become an important exploration of the current in-depth understanding of online social media. This essay combines and summarizes the new media situations that WeChat has constructed and discuss the influences of these situations on social interactions according to situation theory. This research also explores how WeChat scenario affects its clients' communication behaviors and relations through the methodology of depth interview, questionnaires and participatory-observation. Through the combing of the media scenes and their influences on WeChat and expand the analysis of the two virtual scenes of group chat and circle of friends. The user realizes the common presence of the virtual body through the WeChat group chat scene.. In the circle of friends, the users have the autonomy to control the screen, and can switch the front and back areas in the scene of the circle of friends at will. WeChat makes the online and offline scenes continue to merge through the expansion of the offline acquaintance circle and the social interaction of strangers on the line at the same time. Using in-depth interviews and questionnaire surveys, the author finds that the interaction scene of WeChat construction has two effects on social interaction behavior. On one hand, some new methods of communications have emerged. The virtual scenario socialization creates the interaction between human and machine, and the open scene of WeChat makes the user's personality and ability become their shining point which can makes them attractive. The user uses "likes" as a way of communication in the situations. On the other hand, the expression package came into being in order to provide more scene information. Situations changes in the front, middle, and back areas affect the user's expression package usage behavior.

Keywords: Media Situation; Sence of Communication; Social Interaction; Social Behavior; WeChat.

1. Introduction

Until August 30, 2018, the number of internet users in China has reached 802 million, with a penetration rate of 57.7%. The scale of mobile internet users in China has reached 788 million. Mobile phones have become a part of the users' body which can not be separated. Among the many social apps on mobile phones, WeChat is the APP that occupies the majority of users' time. The latest Internet trend report sent by Mary Meeker, the Internet queen, shows that Chinese internet users spend 3.1 billion hours on mobile applications every day and WeChat alone accounting for 900 million hours. In terms of the usage time and frequency of WeChat, it is inseparable from the lives of users. Wechat provides different communication scenarios to the users. Different from print media, radio and television, and other electronic media, WeChat offers a more diverse range of scenarios. What's more, mobile phones are portable, so as the WeChat scenarios. Under different chat scenarios, users have different ways of communicating and their social interaction behaviors vary greatly.

Merowitz applied the perspective of situational theory to examine the relationship between electronic media context and people's communicative behavior during the time when media such as broadcasting and television are popular. This essay will analysis the impact of WeChat platform on users' social interaction behavior in the mobile Internet era based on the "situational theory".

2. Research Method

2.1. Method

This essay uses literature reviews, in-depth interviews, online ethnography and questionnaire surveys as research methods. First of all, retrieve and arrange data such as domestic and foreign references and latest works on "scenario" theory and online communication behavior research, official Internet statistics report in recent years and WeChat annual user report, etc. Secondly, conduct interviews with active WeChat users and summarize the characteristics of their social behavior in different scenarios such as (front zone, middle zone, back zone), in order to analyze the internal influential mechanism. Thirdly, conduct long-term observation on WeChat group such as working group and interests group etc. Obtain first hand information from the leader on the group by one-on-one in-depth interview. Finally, this essay focuses on qualitative methods and supplemented by quantitative basic questionnaire surveys, in order to provide a more comprehensive user profile of WeChat. There are 22 questions on the questionnaire including Likert level 5 scale and multiple choices. The questionnaire is attached on the appendix. There were 400 online questionnaires distributed to WeChat friend circle and group on 11 February 2019. After retrieved and eliminated invalid questionnaires, 347 valid questionnaires can be used for the further analysis.

2.2. Samples Draw

Specifically, in the selection of research subjects, sampling considerations were mainly taken into account factors such as age, geographical range, gender, occupation, etc. Firstly, because of the huge amount of Wechat users, author chose users aged 18 to 55. Secondly, there are clear opinion leaders, followers, and divers in the WeChat group. Although there is a crossover phenomenon between different roles, in the selection of interviewees, the author mainly focuses on opinion leaders (active users in the group). Finally, due to the influence of geographical scope, the author contact with WeChat users in multiple places such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Changsha within six months to understand their basic usage situation.

Many users have their regular Wechat group such as hobby group and work group. For example, Abin, one of the interviewees, organize his own work group called "communication group of internet product managers". Tingting also creates her department HR work group. Author joined 5 similar groups and communicated with the interviewees about their work group every two weeks and keep relevant records. The large number of dialogues and images in group chats are also important reference materials in this essay.

3. Results

Television provides the scene as realistic as possible and try to make every audience empathize with it. This virtual reality presents a wonderful world to the audience. However, audience can not "communicate" with the role in the television. Contrary to the virtual reality scene of television, interactions on internet are a kind of realistic virtual scenes. Everyone who is not on the spot can be linked by internet and create a new virtual world.

3.1. Interaction between Human and Machine: Imagined Communities

The scene of WeChat communication is a virtual space built on the internet. Although users are not physically meeting each other, their WeChat profile pictures are in color 24hours each day and give users the illusion that everyone is online. In fact, except urgent communication status, people are not always willing to meet each other face to face in regular daily communications.

This kind of new scenarios delivers a new way of communication among the users. Through WeChat communication, deep level interaction and consensus can be formed without face to face commutation. Even though some of the users may never meet each other in reality, their social relationships can not be damaged.

This new way of social interaction has formed a new social group. People's social interactions are no longer limited to blood and geographical ties. Because there is no physical contact, it becomes an imagined community. Groups are imaginative. In interest groups, each member may not know each other in reality, but their interconnected imagery lives in the hearts of each member.

According to Anderson's Imagined Communities, he stressed some common points, which some of them are man made, in order to understand a sort of new social identities. Anderson focused on Indonesia's physical space, attempting to establish common features among numerous islands and ethnic groups. For example, the fervent attention to common national construction. Even in the smallest country, members may never know or hear others' voice forever. In their view, however, other members' characteristics are quite similar. The virtual space constructed by WeChat allows members to interact with each other, influence each other, provide support, share common experiences, and share emotional connections. Although the users can not meet in present, the community scene constructed through WeChat forms an imagined community to maintain and expand interpersonal relationships

3.2. Open Scene: Personality and Ability have become the Focus of Attention

Under the circumstances of off-line communications, people gather together and mutual attention is triggered by physical connections and interactions between each other. However, WeChat constructs the media scene on internet. Various symbols on the internet have become the focus of attention, such as images, text, voice, and videos. The different social scenes determine that people's focus in the interaction process is also different.

Users search for some focus points on WeChat and also hope to become the object of attention. Even if they are not the central figure, receiving attention occasionally makes them feel a weak group connection. Users are independent and free so that they can independently active in every community. Rely on the attention from others, they can keep a loose connections.

Social interaction is established in an open environment in WeChat. During their interactions, they lost the sense of regional space and physical contact for on-site communication. Comparing with television, power and wealth are no longer considered as the most important symbol when WeChat hobby groups are established. Mutual attention in WeChat communication depends on the utilization of personal economic, power and cultural resources. In some way, whether a person is interesting or full of characteristics is the most important social symbol.

In previous local scenarios, some users sometimes played insignificant roles in groups due to their low social status, and even became excluded outsiders. But ordinary people can be focused because of their interesting traits in the scene which is provided by WeChat. According to "No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior", Merowitz indicates that in the 1960s, the popularity of television exposed male backstage behavior, and scene fusion led to a surge in the "feminist movement". Compared with the empowerment of present internet technology, WeChat has made some users whose power and wealth are not dominant in social interaction regain social attention and recognition because of the display of personality or other capabilities.

As predicted by Merowitz: The social stage of character performance has undergone a combination adjustment, and people's concept of "appropriate behavior" has also begun to change. Perfect performance requires perfect stage. WeChat's requirement for scene reconfiguration is to maintain a consistent image in all scenes, whether it is the front or back area. A great image requires a sense of mystery and careful control over the audience's impression. Because most of the stage scenes established on WeChat are controlled by the audience independently, performing on the front stage showcases personality and abilities, while also providing sufficient relaxation and leisure space in the backstage. This enables many "civilian heroes" to become opinion leaders in WeChat groups.

3.3. Interactions within the Scene: “Like”

The social media app Facebook introduced the "Like" function in 2009 and this small social media button was quickly imitated by almost all social media apps. Many social media platforms in China have also added this like feature. Netizens interpret the word "like" as "great", "I also agree", "I really like your content" and other meanings.

After adding the like feature to WeChat Moments, the scene has become more interactive. The scene pattern of Moments is similar to the differential order pattern proposed by Mr. Fei Xiaotong. Under this relationship pattern, people themselves are always at the center of this relationship, and all values are centered around themselves. Users take themselves as the center and post the latest life status on the lake surface of their social circle, like stones thrown into the water, social relationships like ripples of water, pushing out in circles and further away. As shown in the following figure, users publish their recent life situation on WeChat moments and show themselves. Friends in social media express their interest in them by liking them. In this scenario structure, liking on WeChat has a low social cost and can become a tool for entering the inner circle for the outermost layer of people, namely "weak relationships" (born relationships). This also inspired the birth of the “likes party”.

Users in a "weak relationship" state have very little contact with each other. Many users have only met each once or never met in present. At this point, WeChat has become a means of social interaction. Through Liking, a simple tap on the heart button can not only maintain social relations, but also avoid the awkwardness caused by excessive intimacy. A weakly connected friend who was originally just a nodding acquaintance, becomes a part of the other person's social circle through frequent likes on their social circle. The "weak relationships" that were originally just zero connections gradually transform into a "strong relationship" through the connections in the scene of social circles. For the "strong relationships" (acquaintances), Like is a tool for emotional communication.

In the friend circle scene, users can not only be able to see a friend's front-end "performance", but also see the reactions of other "viewers". Thus, following the crowd driven trend of liking also come with it. Just like in a theater where people applaud when they see other audiences applaud after a performance is over. Facebook has redefined the meaning of "like" in the virtual world. The likes of users do not necessarily mean they really like them, sometimes it's just because their mutual friends have all liked them. This situation is more like having to give likes due to personal connections and the same goes for WeChat Moments.

Following the trend of liking causes the "like" to lose its initial sense of identity. This kind of liking, carried out in order to maintain consistency with others, makes each other more like container. When liking, the container lightly touches each other, but after touching, there is no intersection. Following the trend of liking cannot penetrate into the user's heart and achieve more interactive communication.

In addition to following the trend and giving likes, there are also many ways to give likes in the form of "drinking the lottery". Many users may suffer sad and angry experiences, such as being treated unfairly abroad. They can also receive likes from many friends when posting content on their social media. This kind of liking out of a parody mentality makes liking completely meaningless. This situation will not only fail to strengthen social relationships, but also lead to further distance between each other.

4. Conclusion

Virtual scenes enable human-computer interaction, while open WeChat scenes make user personality and abilities a focus of attention. In the friend circle scenario, users use "likes" as a way of communication. In the chat scene, people rely solely on letters and traditional email communication in the past and the expressions and body movements of both parties were hidden. This concealment causes the scene to lose visual clues that can be observed. However, the hidden expressions and actions in people's hearts are once again restored by adding new symbol emoticons. Different WeChat scenarios affect the behavior of users sending emojis. The emojis in the front scene are mostly

WeChat built-in emojis, while the emojis used in the back scene are full of elements such as "failure", "tragedy", "violence", "abuse", etc. it is the release of emotions by users in a relaxed setting.

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