

Interplay between Users and Social Media: “Pin” in WeChat Moments as an Example: From an Affordance Perspective

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Abstract. This paper explores the newly released WeChat feature “pin” as an example to explore the gap in current research on affordance theory. WeChat, as the leading social media in China, displays distinct Chinese characteristics of socialization, which thus requires an in-depth investigation not only into the mechanism itself but also into the users’ psychology. Therefore, the author points out the theoretical gap in extant literature that the subject-object dichotomy hinders scholars from a more comprehensive study of social media and strives to promote a methodological revolution to combine the two categories. Modeled after the division of affordances’ emergence, perception, and actualization, this paper tentatively discusses the potential effects of “pin” on both posters and receivers in WeChat Moments. Most importantly, with a proposal for the revolution of extant theoretical methodology, this paper is aimed at providing a new perspective for ongoing research and encouraging an innovative model in future studies.

Keywords: Affordance; Pin; Social Media.

1. Introduction

In recent years, as WeChat has become China’s leading social media application, increased attention has been paid to the WeChat study. WeChat’s unique transmission mechanism and huge number of users has ensured that WeChat has become the focal point in China’s media studies. For one thing, with the development of WeChat’s new features, more research has been conducted. Nevertheless, most still focuses on the transmissional and economic implications and insufficient attention is paid to users’ intention, motivation, experience, and interaction with the media. For example, Yan (2015) points out that extant WeChat research can fall into six categories, including the basic research, study on WeChat transmission mechanism, WeChat’s impact on college students’ socializing, traditional media to WeChat, WeChat public platform, and comparison research between Weibo and WeChat [1]. For another, although a few scholars have considered users’ psychological needs, they fail to perceive the user and the media as a unity, overlooking the significance of studying the specific media mechanism. For instance, in 2013, Yin explores how WeChat caters to users’ requirements in the approach of Uses and Gratifications, discussing WeChat’s roles in emotional exchange, self-actualization, and anxiety remission [2]. As groundbreaking research in WeChat using the approach of Uses and Gratifications, it not only offers a new perspective for future studies to follow but contributes innumerable inspirations to the whole media study field. However, although the author proactively attends to users’ needs, specifically under the guide of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, the reciprocal impact that the WeChat mechanism has on users’ psychology is understudied. Since the release of ephemeral time settings in WeChat Moments, there has been increased scholarly interest in studying users’ psychology. For example, Jiang sheds light on the relationship between users’ self-presentation and the feature of “Visible-for-Three-Days” [3]. Furthermore, Deng demonstrates some psychological factors such as herd mentality, spotlight effect, and the conflict between “I” and “me” in Mead’s definition, revealing some detrimental effects of the feature on user’s interpersonal socialization [4]. However, the author only offers a general review, without an in-depth examination of how the feature challenges users’ psychological health and equilibrium. What’s more, a few other studies have been conducted to suggest users’ motivation for privacy management [5] and self-disclosure [6]. Nevertheless, WeChat research has seen limited collaboration between communication

and psychology, leaving the study on the interaction between media's material mechanism and users' psychology blank.

The release of the feature "pin" in WeChat Moments not only enables new possibilities for users but poses challenges as well, which refers to the negative consequences of affordance. As technology plays an increasingly essential role in people's lives, it's of the same significance to explore users' psychological needs as to study the media mechanism from a functionalist perspective. In media studies, apart from investigating how media mechanisms can facilitate users' lives and how such facilitation can be optimized, it also matters to learn and even predict users' needs, both manifest and latent. For media researchers, not only is their duty to provide but also to help users dig out their own potential needs and satisfy them, which requires researchers to consider psychological significance. Affordance theory was born with the advantage that the psychological needs and motives of the subject are incorporated into the functional features of the object, which serves as a promising approach to cover both materialist and psychological implications in media studies. While affordance theory has been an ideal avenue to avoid social and technological determinism, most of the extant literature adopts it only to identify existing affordances [7]. Therefore, there is a need to implement a new research model and methodology. To serve this end, this paper proposes affordance as an innovative attempt to bridge the gap. In this paper, firstly, conceptualization progress in defining affordance will be examined; secondly, limitations and shortcomings in extant affordance research will be discussed; finally, thorough explanations will be given concerning the rationality of the application of affordance theory to WeChat studies, specifically about the newly released feature "pin", and a possible methodology is to be proposed for ongoing research in WeChat studies.

2. Understanding Affordance Theory

2.1. The Evolution of Defining Affordance

Media studies have increasingly paid attention to social media affordance. Since Gibson initiated affordance theory in 1977, the conceptualization of social media affordance has undergone multiple developments. As is calculated, the definition brought up by Treem and Leonardi has been dominant in recent years, which contains a "four-item taxonomy (visibility, editability, persistence, association)" [8]. Based on extant literature, Ronzhyn concludes social media affordance as "the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms" [8]. From this definition, one can infer that it's highly relational and not fully objective and can be realized only in an "animal-environment system" [9]. In essence, media researchers can never bypass either the inherent logic and mechanism of technology or the complexity and subjectivity of the human psyche. As Gibson asserts, affordance can "cut across the subject-object dichotomy" [7]. Therefore, affordance theory reintroduces materiality into technology studies and explore users' motivations and expectations, bridging the gap between artifact materiality and user subjectivity [10]. Gibson's definition importantly differentiates between "affordances' perception" and "affordances' actualization", which means affordances can only be realized after a successful practice by the user [11]. In 2013, Bernhard et al. distinguished among affordances' emergence, perception, and actualization. Furthermore, the authors clarify corresponding preconditions of the realization of the three concepts: respectively, the properties of the object and its user, information about affordance existence, and the level of difficulty in perceiving affordance [11]. Based on this model, Pozzi et al. create a model to investigate affordance's effects, and they hold different from Bernhard et al. that it's "factors" rather than "external information and actualization effort" that influence affordances' perception and actualization [12]. By factors, the authors refer to various levels of challenges that "organizational actors" may face during their attempt to realize an affordance.

2.2. Limitations in Existing Methodology

While efforts in conceptualizing affordance have undoubtedly inspired ongoing research, the extant literature on media affordance remains understudied. The binarism, between subject and object, user and technology, subjectivist and materialist, and qualitative and quantitative, has spanned a considerable period in academia. As Faraj and Azad consider, some scholars have displayed a tendency towards voluntarism, underestimating the material aspects of technology use and overestimating the significance actor's subjectivity [10]. Additionally, some affordance studies are criticized for being technological determinists, paying insufficient attention to users' emotions, awareness, subjectivity, and their potential interplay with the media [13]. In response, this paper proposes a more comprehensive perspective with a proportionate emphasis distributed to the subject and object, effects and functions, and psychology and mechanism.

3. Affordance Theory in WeChat Studies: "Pin" As an Example

Recently, with a rapid update of features, WeChat has entailed a series of mixed features of Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, X (used to be called Twitter), and Weibo, which also includes Tencent's original innovations and creations. Thus, to some extent, studies on these social media applications can be comparable to those of WeChat. Efforts have been made to study them from a social media affordance perspective. As is estimated in a study, by 2022, there had been 55 articles focusing on Facebook's affordance. Likewise, the number for X, Instagram, and WhatsApp studies were 38, 12, and 6, respectively. Notably, there had been 6 articles concerning WeChat [8]. The implication of the result is twofold: for one thing, WeChat studies in an affordance approach are still marginally conducted; for another, more emphasis is put on transmission and financial implications, rather than users' psychological needs or cognitive effects that technological mechanisms can have on users.

3.1. The Affordance of "Pin"

As is known, launched in 2012, Moments has characteristics like immediateness and fragmented Ness. Since Moments has always been considered as a social platform for immediate share, an investigation into the causes and motivations of releasing the feature "pin" is attached to increased significance. Metaphorically, "pin" emphasizes the continuation and persistence of contents, which sharply contrasts Moments' former characteristics. The reason why the feature "pin" in WeChat should be endowed with such importance is not only that WeChat as a social media possesses uniqueness and particularity in its mechanism, but also that it should be studied in the context of socialization with vivid Chinese styles, which entails both conventional communicative norms and emerging rules formed in modern society. For example, Chinese people's emphasis on "face" (translated as "mian zi" in Chinese) as well as the hierarchical structure both in the workplace [14] and in the range of traditional Chinese families. Therefore, analyzing the "pin" feature through the affordance lens is an optimal method for examining WeChat users' psychology, contributing to a deeper understanding of their needs and requirements. For clarity, the author will follow Bernhard's division of affordance into emergence, perception, and actualization. However, unlike Bernhard et al., this paper will stick to Pozzi et al.'s model, attributing the perception and actualization of affordances to "factors" [12]. Before the discussion, it is significant to advocate a comprehensive view in studying the feature of "pin" in WeChat. Although stressing persistence, the feature of "pin" can be closely related to the former release of ephemeral settings in Moments, one typical example known as "Visible for Three Days".

3.1.1. Users' Paradoxical Social Needs.

To begin with, WeChat's uniqueness in essence and the closely knitted relationship between its contacts endow it with an outstanding position in media studies. In social media studies, WhatsApp is usually considered as the counterpart of WeChat. Despite their similarities, WeChat allows people a much more active online space for interaction, namely Moments (translated as "Peng You Quan" in Chinese). In Moments, not only can users post multimedia content, such as photos and short videos,

but they can share links to music, news, articles from Official Account (translated as “Gong Zhong Hao” in Chinese), lengthy videos from WeChat Channel, and various other contents forwarded from almost all applications available in China’s Mainland. While applications like Facebook and Weibo also allow users to set content’s audience visibility, Moments is merely available to contacts. Considering WeChat’s uniquely private essence, users may have a better understanding of the relationship between WeChat contacts, which significantly influences WeChat users’ psychology. The essential differences between WeChat and other social media knit WeChat users in a closer way, and they are more inclined to update their private life, including achievements of all kinds, pictures of people and natural scenes, and complaints about trivial things, to name a few. In this regard, WeChat indeed bears more resemblance to WhatsApp. Users of both share an intangible sense of privacy and belonging, which indicates a certain degree of intimacy or relevance shared in real life. Nevertheless, in terms of mechanism, there are two major differences between the two applications: for one thing, both textual and visual posts in WhatsApp My Status will automatically expire 24 hours after being posted, which indicates the essential ideological divergence between WhatsApp My Status and WeChat Moments; for another, Moments allow more diverse forms of the contents, part of which is attributed to Tencent’s massive sub-functions like Official Account and WeChat Channel. However, about WeChat’s recent release of an ephemeral setting and the fact that a considerable number of WeChat users would delete their posts within a relatively short period, it’s undeniable that immediate sharing is considered one of the major characteristics of Moments. Nevertheless, users’ right to keep the contents in a longer term, or further, their tendency to eternalize some contents should be regarded as major triggers to the feature of “pin”. The coexistence of ephemeral setting and “pin” demonstrates a stark paradox among users: they have a higher requirement for the availability to post temporary contents while demanding at least identical accessibility to show some contents over a longer period for certain reasons.

Since Goffman coined the concept of self-presentation, more scholars have adapted it to media studies, interpreting users’ behaviors as impression management efforts in front of others [15]. Regarding the closely knitted relationship between WeChat users, WeChat Moments has been somehow considered as a potential stage for social comparison. In this comparison, people perform to keep a desirable image, creating social masks and alternative personas [15]. The sequence of the release of ephemeral setting and “pin” is one of the crucial reasons why it’s suggested that the two should be studied interactively and complementarily. Although users have access to content hiding, such hiding is unselective. In other words, they have no means to keep what they want to display in the longer term when hiding from others. Thus, the feature “pin” affords to enable users to selectively maintain contents of long-term significance, while retaining their autonomy to decide what they want to share in the short term.

3.1.2. Users’ Personality Traits.

Apart from this, users’ personality and disposition should also be taken into consideration, for different personality traits could lead to various behaviors. In a 2021 research, three personality traits in The Big Five Personality Inventory including conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism, are perceived to be significantly related to the High Upward Social Comparison Group [16]. Correspondingly, a higher frequency of upward social comparison could trigger a higher degree of social media addiction, elevated censorship of avoiding judgment, and a growing sense of security when using social media [16]. Supposedly, this group of users can display a higher tendency to keep content that is beneficial to their image management, and once this group has extended to a certain scale that is large enough to initiate a functional revolution, the feature “pin” comes into being. Additionally, users’ requirement for privacy management also contributes to the emergence of “pin”. When defining the boundaries of their private content, not only can social media users use privacy control methods to restrict their audience but also utilize permeability and linkage to reduce limitation and expand potential audience [17]. In the context of privacy management, the feature “pin”, in contrast to ephemeral settings, can be regarded as a metaphorical form of boundary permeability. By putting important, meaningful, and memorial content on the top of one’s Moments, the actors are

suggestively demonstrating the unspoken significance of the contents and their willingness to keep them. When it comes to the perception and actualization of affordances, this paper contends that the challenges users encounter during the process of organization can affect affordances' perception and actualization [18]. For example, whether it's easy for users to find the button "pin" can significantly influence affordance perception and actualization. Also, users' willingness to use the feature and their capability of understanding the contents will contribute to different degrees of affordance's actualization.

3.2. The Effects of "Pin"

Hafezieh and Eshraghian have made a systematic review of affordances' effects, such as privacy, disclosure, self-presentation, and increased ambiguity and tension. As to the feature "pin", there are two groups in the affordance practice, namely the posters and the receivers, with whom the effects of affordances can differ respectively. In this part, the tentative analysis will be made on pin affordance's effects on both posters and receivers and supreme significance is put on ongoing empirical research to fill in the theoretical blank.

For posters, the ability to pin contents enables them to fulfill socially desirable roles and manage their impression effectively. On the one hand, it's undeniable that "pin" empowers users with a better self-management strategy; on the other hand, it can also trigger a series of negative effects. Take personality traits as an example: since people of certain traits are more prone to conduct upward social comparison, they are more likely to pin contents that are favorable to self-presentation in their Moments. According to research, these people have a higher possibility of undergoing negative feelings like depression and are more dependent on social media [16]. In a case study on Goffman's self-presentation theory, the authors point out that users might adopt embellishment to create their persona, and the online self can differ from the offline self in various aspects [15]. These findings can also be adapted to WeChat studies, for its interpretation of identity and self is applicative to the feature "pin". The invention of the online self is a subtle demonstration of people's submission and concession to the virtual world, and for multiple reasons people are afraid to expose the real self to others, either seeking recognition and affection positively or avoiding conflicts and judging negatively. Although it remains unclear whether the affordance of "pin" which enables self-presentation is detrimental to posters' psychological well-being, it's worth noticing that it significantly increases the possibility for users' self-labeling and self-splitting [15].

To receivers, the feature of "pin" may serve as a resort to "the Fear of Missing Out" (abbreviated as FOMO), which is one of the most salient psychological distresses that social media impose on its users, for significant contents are pinned to the top of the Moments and will no longer be missed out. However, receivers' personality traits and the degree to which the affordance is perceived and actualized matter to the effects that such an affordance can have. For instance, a high upward social comparison group can have a higher degree of FOMO [16], while the actual correlation between FOMO and receiving pinned posts is still understudied. For one thing, different personalities may influence users' acceptance of those contents, hence affecting the degree of affordance's actualization. For example, people with a higher degree of agreeableness, openness, and extroversion may be more inclined to view pinned moments and, thus more likely to react toward this feature. On the contrary, others may have less exposure to those contents, and don't respond as promptly as their counterparts. For another, since people who are more passionate about upward social comparison are more likely to self-embellish, receivers of this group will have a higher possibility of encountering negative feelings like depression and frustration through the process of social comparison. Nevertheless, the actual effects may differ with personality traits and other conditions in reality.

4. Discussion

4.1. Major Contributions

This paper contributes in three main ways.

Firstly, this paper makes a general review of the state of WeChat studies, pointing out the lack of balance between the functionalist perspective and psychological considerations. To bridge this gap, this paper proposes the approach of affordance theory in WeChat studies, opening new avenues for Chinese social media studies and appealing for more emphasis on studying the newly released feature in WeChat, specifically from a comprehensive viewpoint.

Secondly, this paper innovatively pays attention to the feature “pin”, with consideration for its relevance and interaction with ephemeral settings, indicating media users’ seemingly paradoxical mindset and their deep ambivalence in media use, which brings further discussion to the characteristics of current information-based society and the dilemma people are confronting.

Thirdly, this paper addresses a proposal for affordance studies, advocating to break the dichotomy between subject and object, and between psychological effects and functional affordances. Ideally, it’s expected that scholars and psychologists should make joint efforts, applying the conceptual and empirical progress of each other’s field to their studies. Hopefully, such a proposal in conceptual innovation could induce a revolutionary methodology or model in media studies.

4.2. Expected Limitations

However, there are also limitations and weaknesses in this paper. For instance, the discussion on the impact that personality traits have on users’ behavior online is insufficient. While promoting to introduction of psychological elements like personality traits into affordance study, this paper has not established a specific and ready-made model. What’s more, the illustration of affordances’ effects has not been backed up by empirical study or data, thus can only serve as speculation and theoretical assumption. Despite all the shortcomings, this paper aims to provide insights on the existing theoretical model, especially in the approach of affordance theory, striving to force a constructive proposal for ongoing research.

5. Conclusion

This paper investigates the possibility of the application of affordance theory in WeChat studies, focusing on the newly released feature “pin”. The affordance theoretical model consists of three parts, namely the emergence, the perception, and the actualization. Furthermore, the author investigates deeper causes and motivations in the three steps, discussing the significance of the methodology that unifies subject and object, effects and functions, and psychology and mechanism. In the discussion on the affordance of the feature “pin”, this paper concludes the most salient properties of WeChat Moments and its users. When it comes to the effects of affordance, with a review of theories like self-presentation and upward social comparison, the author ventures to establish some assumptions of the impacts of “pin” on both posters and receivers. Lastly, this paper emphasizes that the significance of exploring new thoughts and motivating ongoing research outweighs that of the preceding discussion itself.

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