Chapter 16
Examining the Role of WeChat in Advertising

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ABSTRACT

WeChat, the most popular social networking service mobile app in China, enables users to contact friends with text, audio, video contents as well as get to know new people within a range of a certain distance. Its latest version has gone beyond the pure social function and opened a window into marketing. This study applies activity theory as a framework to explore new features of WeChat as a new platform for advertising. Then the authors qualitatively analyze the implications that marketers adapted and appropriated WeChat to engage with their customers and in turn how these implications modified the ways of advertising. The significance of this study is that it applied activity theory as an attempt to complement the theoretical pillars of communication study. Activity theory focuses on the activity itself rather than the interaction between WeChat and the users. Second, activity theory reveals a 2-way process which emphasizes both on how advertisers adapt WeChat based on everyday practice; and how WeChat modifies the activities which the advertisers engage in.

INTRODUCTION

Integrated with multimedia and Internet functions, a smartphone allows people to access diverse social communication spaces, where the existing types of conventional communication (calling and texting) mix with types of internet communication (email and social networking service). Smartphone makes the online space available 24/7, and thus develops ubiquitous sociality (Lee, 2013). Moreover owing to the fast growth of information technology, more types of mobile social media have been created, such as WhatsApp, Line, and WeChat. These mobile social networking services have been growing their influence among people, especially youth, around the world. Their user-friendly interfaces conveniently
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present recent information with text, photos, and videos (Pelet, 2014). All of these benefit marketing practitioners to wage their campaigns and engage the audiences.

The prevalence of smartphones in people’s daily life has critically changed the consumer’s decision-making process (Pelet, 2014). The consumers now could easily access professional opinions, others’ reviews, price comparisons and other convenient functions, which help consumers to make full-scale evaluation on products and services. This suggests marketers to take account of new ways to influence consumers and to carefully implement social networking service as a marketing tool (Pelet, 2014).

WeChat is the most popular mobile application in relation to social networks in current China. It was developed by Tencent company in China and released in January 2011. WeChat provides users with multimedia communication function including speaker phone, photo and mood sharing, text message, corporation official account, location sharing, location based searching and service. The latest version of WeChat added more functions such as game center, online payment, emoticon shop, street view scanning and scanning for translation. It served different countries, languages, operating systems and network formats. It took 56 months for Facebook to reach 100 million users and 30 months for WhatsApp. But when it comes to WeChat, it took only 15 months to reach 100 million users (Wu, Jakubowicz & Cao, 2013). Nowadays in China, WeChat users reached around 500 million. Moreover, the overseas user amount has broken through 100 million by the end of 2014 (Tencent, 2015).

While academic studies have been focusing on usage, society, behavior and other particular issues in the mobility context, advertisers also started to pay attention to the advantage offered by mobile social media such as WeChat. Compared with conventional mobile advertising methods such as sending SMS and MMS, now advertising through apps became the trend. As discussed before, the advertising on WeChat is based on user’s strong-tied social connectedness. The marketers cannot depend on mass messaging to WeChat users, but take advantage of the users’ social connectivity for propagation.

For the companies and advertisers, the official accounts of WeChat enable them to engage with their customers with a new method. Through WeChat official account, the company is able to approach the customers privately since all the conversation between them cannot be seen or commented on by others. Since WeChat official account is smart phone-based, consumers could read the messages anytime as well as forward them to Weibo, Moments (Peng You Quan¹), friends and save them in WeChat. Since its 5.0 version, one of the most significant changes is that WeChat has separated the official account into two different forms: service account² and subscription account³. Owing to these new features, the customers seized the initiative to receive the messages only if they want to. Meanwhile, the new situation reminds advertisers not to use WeChat as a broadcast tool, which has been widely applied in other social media such as Qzone and Weibo. Instead of message bombardment, companies are demanded to offer more valuable contents as well as a high level of interactive experience with its audience (Leung, 2013).

The academia and industry are always sensitive to any new-born advertising media. However WeChat, which has already attracted almost one tenth of the population on this planet, has not brought enough attention to the marketing communication area. This study applied activity theory (AT) as framework to explore new features of WeChat as a new platform for advertising. Then we qualitatively analyzed the implications that marketers adapted and appropriated WeChat to engage with their customers and in turn how these implications modified the ways of advertising.