

WeChat influence on the way Chinese people celebrate Chinese New Year.

Abstract

Aim: In this research, we investigate the impact of social media, especially that of the instant messaging platform, on how Chinese people celebrate traditional festivals. We are particularly interested in how it brings about the alternation in communication and interaction between people, and consequently how people change their perceptions of traditional festivals. We mainly examine the influence of **WeChat** on **Chinese New Year**, aiming to generate as many relevant findings as possible with the limited resources.

Design/methodology/approach: The study adopted the qualitative/ deductive methodology by conducting 8 in-depth interviews with Chinese people of various age range.

Finding: The finding suggests that although WeChat slightly alter the way people celebrate New Year, it enhances traditional values and restores people's perception of Chinese New Year as it provides innovating ways of communication. Moreover, the age difference contributes to the extent in which WeChat affect people.

Key words: *New Media, Social Media, instant messaging service program, WeChat, Chinese New Year, social trend, age, communication, technology, China*

Literature Review

Since the research topic selected is relatively narrow, we can hardly find related studies which directly illustrate the relationship between WeChat and Chinese New Year. However, there are plenty of research about new media and the functionality of WeChat which provides essential information concerning our research subject.

Blumler and McQuail (1968) and Lull (1995) who adopted active audience perspectives introduced *the uses and gratifications model* in their research. They argue that people use the media in order to fulfill specific need: it can be biological, psychological or social. How people use media gratify their needs, Blumler and McQuail noted, will depend upon influences such as age, social position, etc. For instance, they examine the media television and identified four basic needs people use TV to gratify: **diversion**, 'to escape from routines, to get out from under problems, to ease worries or tensions'; **personal relationship**, to compensate for the decline of community; **personal identity**, to confirm or modify identity; or **surveillance**, to gain information about social world to attain other purposes. Moreover, Lull's study of families' use of television also adds credibility to argument above. Based on participant observation, he came to the conclusion that people actively use media in a social way. Both research show that people have considerable choice in the way they utilize and interpret the media, and so media are not influential as they seem to be.

Another research conducted by Boyle (2007) suggests a generational divide of the use of new media. According to Boyle, the media experienced by young people growing up in UK are more immediate and accessible than that of previous generation, and the younger people are more likely to use media for entertainment and social networking through the internet. The data from *Ofcom report 'Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report'*, support his observation. It reveals that children spends more time online compared with adults, and four of five in 12- to 15-years-olds have a profile on social networking

account. It also shows an increase in the use of tablet which shows the trend of divergence in terms of how people use new media.

Although there has been sufficient published works associated with social media, few researchers concentrate on the aspect of instant messaging service programs, which highlights the interaction between people. In addition, previous research failed to explain how new media truly work in China, and how it is perceived differently by different generation. Therefore, our research hope to seek the answer.

In addition, many research on WeChat reveal its influence on the individuals of the society. Zhuojing Lee (2017) investigate on the impact of **WeChat Red Envelop**. Based on the quantitative data about people's attitude towards WeChat Red Envelop, he concludes that it meets the characteristics of users' pursuit of novelty. In a word, WeChat makes the transmission of New-Year-blessing become more convenient and faster. The reference of secondary information of *WeChat data Report 2017* adds support to his argument that WeChat (especially WeChat Red Envelop) becomes increasingly influential: WeChat has over 9 hundred million daily active users, and fifty million of them are older users (aged 55-77) who are monthly active. Among the New Year holidays, over 45 billion of WeChat Red Envelop was sent out.

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Operationalization of key terms

● WeChat

An instant messaging service programs which has become increasingly popular among users for its high degree of privacy and the convenience. It has many functions: besides sending free voice messages, video, images and text, we can share data streaming media content on WeChat, and we can also get access to some third-party software, such as movie ticket selling center. Since WeChat has many advantages, it receives widely recognition it develops rapidly.

● WeChat lucky money

The concept is based on the Chinese tradition of *Hongbao* (pocket money), where money is given to family and friends as a gift during Chinese New Year. It offers users the ability to give monetary gifts in the form of virtual 'credits' to other users of WeChat. The person who sends out the gifts can attach words of blessing to the red envelope, just as what they do when giving out pocket money in real world. The envelope can be sent to an individual user or to a chat group. Money is deposited into a user's WeChat Pay account, which can be used for purchases.

● Chinese New Year

Traditionally, families will reunite and celebrate Chinese New Year together. Having reunion dinners, eating dumplings, staying up all night, setting off firecrackers, passing out red envelopes and other activities are the most popular customs of the Spring Festival. Nevertheless, it varies from places to places. Technologies have brought about some changes in customs.

Methodology

For our research we have chosen to use semi-structured interview as our research method. Semi structured interview gives us space to have a prepared question list whilst coming up with our own questions during the interviews. By using this method, we are able to collect results in a qualitative form that can provide us more information and the reasoning behind them. However, it also creates problems since it requires skillful researchers who can take control of the process. Nevertheless, it seems to be the best method that is suited for our study because our aim was not only to collect the number of usage of we chat's functions but also to seek how people in different age groups view it.

In the existing conditions, we are able to conduct the interviews between our family members. They have been asked the following question linked with Chinese New Year and WeChat functions. Each interview takes up an average time of 15 minutes and it's either done face to face or on electronic devices. We have recorded the whole interview under participant's allowance. Therefore, it can be utilized when we are analyzing our further findings, any important content will not be dismissed.

● Adelaide's interviewees-

The Han Family is a middle-classed family which originally comes from Hainan Province, the southern-most China.

1. Female Cousin 25, works as an accountant in Shanghai away from parents
2. Elder brother 19, studies in USA, cannot come back during Chinese New Year due to study
3. Father 51, has a career in financial sector, frequently travels to many other province for business purpose
4. Aunt 42, works as an English teacher in Hainan
5. Grandpa 77, retired from works, live in Hainan, during the Chinese New Year Holiday all the relatives will come to his house for New Year's dinner, user of WeChat

● Isabel's interviewees-

1. Younger brother 1 13
2. Younger brother2 13
3. Mother 46
4. Grandpa 80
5. Grandma 80

Strengths and weaknesses of the methodology

Our study is conducted under a limited given condition which lowered our population validity straightly when we only got two families to interview. It means our result can be not applied to all household in China. (However cross generations comparison is an advantage of the sample, applying to all ages.) Also, the validity of the results can be strongly influenced by personal differences. The characteristics or experiences might alter individuals view in WeChat usage. However, by using semi-structured interview, we still left out spaces which can fill out these leakages by asking random questions according to the situation but at the same time it's important to avoid any researcher bias or influence. (It should also be taken into consider when we are analyzing data). Difficulties do not only apply to researchers but also to the interviewees, since it's hard to state if they are just giving in socially desirable answers to please the researchers. Finally, although qualitative data is harder and more difficult to interpret, we (researchers) can also gain a lot from this study, experiences and knowledges, it is a learning approach for us too.

Interview Findings

We conduct the interview separately—each of us interviews our family members. The findings generated are slightly different.

● The Han Family

1. WeChat enhances communication and interaction of people during Chinese New Year

Most of the interviewees believe that WeChat accelerates the mobility between long-distance acquaintance. They can also reconnect with friends they haven't contacted for a long time at this time of year. They listed various functions WeChat possesses that helps them remain close relationship with other users, including but not limit to WeChat video call, WeChat texting and WeChat moment. All these functions enable the interviewees to interact with their family and friends and share their joy about the festivals.

Interviewer: "Do you think WeChat facilitate your communication in spring festivals?"

Brother: "Surely it does. Personally speaking, I depend very much on WeChat to reach my families and friends in China. Phone calling is too expensive (from), and few people check their e-mails regularly, and so WeChat seems to be best choice. More importantly, I can see you guys vividly through video calling, and we can even have New Year's dinner 'face-to-face'. It really makes me feel that I'm at home with my family."

Cousin: "Ever since New Year, I will receive hundreds of blessings from many my WeChat friends. Among them, many are those who I seldom talk to in the reality, because we are not that close, and in fact there are few chances and time for me to do so. However, nowadays it seems to be a cultural norm to send blessings through WeChat to other users. And so, I will also send out the texts to them. This creates an opportunity for us to have some small talks."

Interviewer: "From your perspectives, is it a good thing?"

Cousin: "Yes, I do. It makes me feel warm and happy. No matter the blessings are mass texting or not, I believe the senders write it sincerely. It helps to maintain the relationship between we two."

Other interviewees share similar opinions.

2. With WeChat, many new customs develop, although the old ones are restored

Most interviewees suggest that WeChat does bring about changes, but the alternation actually derives from traditional Chinese culture and it is only supported by Internet logic. As a combination of the traditional culture and the modern thinking, WeChat has made science and technology more compatible with humanity. On the contrary, the old traditions remain unchanged.

Interviewer: "Are there any changes in the way you celebrate Chinese New Year?"

Aunt: "Yes, there are indeed. I mean, when I was at your age, I could not image that one day I would pass out virtual red envelopes to my nephews online."

Interviewer: "So why do you think these changes will take place?"

Aunt: "Many factors jointly contribute to the changes. But I think the most important one is that we can choose between playing with fireworks or chatting on WeChat now—the technology gives us more choices. And gradually, it develops into a set of norms. For instance, everybody will "grab the envelop" on WeChat. I failed to follow the fashion two years ago, and my students made jokes about me being out of date. What I want to say is that, if you do not adopt the changes, it seems that you are deviate from the society. It is similar to New Year's Dinner. It is unusual for a Chinese family to not do so."

Interviewer: "True. Do you render Chinese New Year is different from the past?"

Aunt: "I don't think so. The old traditions are still there, and our next generation still attaches to them. I don't know what will happen in the future, but all the cultures have been restore since thousands of years ago. It is unlikely to change. WeChat only expands former customs into new dimension."

Interviewees indicate that they experience traditional Chinese culture in an innovated way.

Brother: "I will chat with my friends about the contents when I watch Spring Festival Gala."

Grandpa: "I will pass out WeChat envelop to my grandson and my friends instead of real ones. It is more interesting."

3. WeChat will take up some time of face-to-face communication during

However, interviewees do agree that people chat less in reality during Chinese New Year, as they concentrate on replying texts on WeChat. In general, the younger generations spend more time communicating with their peers, and therefore they have less time to spend with their families, especially the elderly.

Grandpa: "My wife (grandma) does not have WeChat account. She always complains to me that how children are always busy on their phones, and how she feel a sense of loss when she cannot take part in our activities on WeChat. Even if I have WeChat, I cannot engage in your chit-chat anymore. It sometimes frustrates us."

4. WeChat Red Envelop serves the profits of media owners, but it benefits the users as well

However, the middle-generation-respondents states that Tencent, the media owner of WeChat, secretly take the advantages of the audience by introducing WeChat Red Envelop.

Father: "In fact, Tencent (company which introduces WeChat) gains most benefits from WeChat Red Envelop. As we all know, we have to link our bank cards to our WeChat account in order to pass out the virtual envelop, and this will encourage people to deposit money into WeChat Pay account. This will consequently urge the consumerism. It seems to be an easy task, yet other companies might spend thousands of costs on advertisement to achieve the aim. However, WeChat can complete this purpose easily. No one will refute the receive red envelop from their friends for they do not want to link their bank card, right?"

Nevertheless, according to the respondents, the nature of Chinese New Year is not undermined.

Interviewer: "Do you think Chinese New Year is being commercialized?"

Father: "It can be. But it is a mutual beneficial process, and through 'grabbing the envelop', the younger generations seem to be keen on the traditions. The picture of Chinese New Year is further established."

● Findings about Isabel's family

1. Feelings towards Chinese New Year

In first part our interview, we lead the interviewees on to talking about their knowledge, feelings and experiences towards Chinese New Year. I summed up the following points:

-Youngsters are less emotive about Chinese New Years

Question: what do you feel about the Chinese New Year before and now?

Younger Brother1 "I don't think there's much difference between the past Chinese New Year and ones nowadays."

Addition: they recognize only 2 traditional customs 1. Family dinner 2. Red pocket

-Elderlies are more exclamatory when it comes to the differences of Chinese New Year now and then.

Question: what do you feel about the Chinese New Year before and now?

Mother: "Of course it was much interesting when I was small."

Grandpa: "Yes. People used to have more attach importance to Chinese New Year."

Addition: more activities were listed like fireworks visiting relations

2. Using of function

Linked with the level of feel for importance of Chinese New Year, it resulted in youngster use less of the WeChat functions, texting blessing, red pocket sending a video calling.

-Youngsters use less of the functions

Question : do you the functions normally?

Brother: "I don't usually use them much and I normally just would text back to texting I receive."

3. Approval level of the functions

In the final question I asked the interviewees to rate what level they think WeChat functions have affected or altered Chinese New Year (out of 10).

-elderly recognized WeChat influence more.

Rating results

Brother 1 4/10

Brother 2 2/10

Grandpa 9/10

Grandma 6/10

Mother 4/10

Addition:

However, elderly emphasized that these functions cannot replace traditional way of the customs like the face to face visits.

grandpa: "WeChat red pockets got limited amount of 200 yuan. It might be little meanings sending through the WeChat red pocket, whereas the real red pockets should be send through face to face to my grandchildren."

Evaluation

Conducting semi-structured interviews to obtain thorough information requires plenty of time. Due to limited time and resources, we can only interview very few respondents. But the sampling method used for this research was not random and the findings could not be generalized to all the younger, middle, and elder generations in China. The sample consisted of close relatives around us only and did not take into account the influence of social media on other social classes since all the respondents are from similar social background. The research did not investigate the cultural differences of the respondent as there might be different in customs between southern and northern China. In order to improve the representativeness, we may conduct more interviews with more people from different social positions and from different areas in China.

Moreover, when choosing the research topic, we voluntarily omit other forms of social networking platforms such as Weibo and Zhihu and other popular interpersonal and interactive media delivery systems in China. This might contribute to certain patterns of behaviors of the respondents, which affect the validity. A separate comparison study between Weibo and WeChat may help understand the situation better. A longitudinal research design might be applied as it will allow the use of social media to be measured in a long term, which will show a trend.

Furthermore, the methodology demands high level of skills of the researchers to ensure the validity of the research. When setting the outlines of the interviews, we rely mainly on our own understanding of the topic and fails to take into account of many perspectives. When conducting the interviews, we find it hard to effectively deliver the key content to the respondents which might negatively affect their understanding. In the beginning of the first few interviews, the answers provided by the interviewees are futile as we cannot lead the interview straight into the topic. We can improve by conducting a pilot interview beforehand to see whether some questions are necessary to be asked, and how to illustrate some key terms clearly.