Exploring Values Embedded Within Social Media Platforms:
A Case Study of WeChat

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates embedded values within WeChat, employing a three-dimensional theoretical framework of cultural affordances. This study involved 31 semi-structured in-depth interviews, follow-up discussions, and observations, with data analysis following the grounded theory approach. The findings highlight the presence of embedded values manifested in WeChat's design features, including offline status omission, mutual likes notification on Friends' Circle, the absence of deletion notification, information symmetry, and the absence of read receipts. These design choices reflect the cultural affordances of WeChat that shape user experiences on the platform. The study also discusses users' responses to these design features and explores their ethical implications. Ultimately, it proposes potential directions for further research in this domain. By uncovering the embedded values of WeChat, this study provides insights into the interplay between technology, culture, and user behavior, offering valuable implications for researchers and practitioners in social media studies.

Keywords: WeChat, Platform Design, Cultural Affordances, Ethical Design, Qualitative Research.

1. Introduction

Each social media platform has its own unique design, including its styles, features, and underlying principles (Gibbs et al., 2015). Each design uncovers the values that are embedded in the corresponding platform, as it can request, demand, encourage, discourage, allow, and refuse certain expressions or behaviors of users (Cirucci, 2023; Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Gibbs et al., 2015; Gillespie, 2010; Bogost & Montfort, 2009). These underlying principles and embedded values manifest the distinctive culture of different platforms. For example, adding multiple gender options on a platform demonstrates the effort of the platforms, such as Facebook, Google+, and Pinterest, to challenge the static and narrow cultural belief of binary gender standards (Bivens & Haimson, 2016). Instagram is fundamentally visually driven since all posts must contain a picture or a video, whereas text is optional (Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019). The unique design of Snapshot reveals its value of ephemeral connection with a focus on closer relationships rather than acquittances (Xu et al., 2016). Different from most social media platforms that support self-presentation, TikTok is designed in a way to encourage imitation and replication, whereas it downplays individual identities and social connections (Darvin, 2022). Virtual learning environments, such as Zoom, can discourage identity performance and management since its design does not clearly display where users can upload a profile picture or edit a profile name (Cirucci, 2023). Significantly, certain designs of a platform can encourage specific values while discouraging others (van Wynsberghe & Moura, 2013). It is crucial to make those embedded values explicit.

Previous research on digital platforms has predominantly focused on the West, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as exemplars (Davis & Xiao, 2021). However, the rapid emergence of Chinese-based online platforms, including WeChat, Bilibili, and Little Redbook, imposes additional challenges to the current Westernized comprehension within this domain. Among these platforms, WeChat is regarded as the most influential social media platform in present-day China (Chen et al., 2018; Harwit, 2017; Negro et al., 2020). By the second quarter of 2020, the number of WeChat monthly active users reached 1.206 billion (Tencent, 2020). WeChat Moments, where users share daily life through various media, accounted for 85.0% of social media usage among Chinese internet users during the same period (CNNIC, 2020).

Due to its popularity in Chinese society, an increasing number of researchers have begun to investigate the design of WeChat. Several prior studies focus on the technological aspect of the platform when examining the design of WeChat. For instance, Peng (2017) argues that WeChat follows an attentive design approach, aiming to capture users' constant attention through features like the "red dot" that indicates new messages. Zhang et al. (2017) note that WeChat is designed based on one's social network, with a primary

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emphasis on creating a virtual space that closely mirrors the real world. Chen, Mao, and Qiu (2018) assert that WeChat represents an exceptional example of sticky design, as it offers a wide range of functions to cater to users' various daily tasks without the need to leave the platform. Montag et al. (2018) highlight that WeChat shares similar functionalities with Western social media platforms, including peer-to-peer texting, video and picture sharing, group chatting, and news feeds. Meanwhile, other prior studies investigate how Chinese culture influences the design of WeChat as well as users' practices on the platform. For example, Kow, Gui, and Cheng (2017) pointed out that WeChat provides a unique payment feature called digital hongbao due to the influence of Chinese hongbao or red packet culture. Both Wang et al. (2019) and Zhou et al. (2017) contend that Chinese cultural values, such as respecting the social hierarchy and harmony, significantly affect users' impression management practice on WeChat. Although previous research on the design of WeChat and related cultural implications provides valuable insights, it fails to address how this design distinguishes itself from other social media platforms in the West. Furthermore, the unique aspects of WeChat associated with its own values and organizational culture remain poorly understood. In this study, we explore the intentional design of WeChat that reveals its specific preferences and values, which may or may not be influenced by the national culture. Drawing upon scholars from the field of cultural studies (e.g., Hall, 1980; Slack & Wise, 2002), our study embraces a comprehensive understanding of culture, examining cultural aspects at the national, regional, organizational, and group levels while considering both well-established and emerging values and practices.

Prior research has indicated that the design of social media platforms is influenced by underlying cultural values (Almakky et al., 2015; Vodanovich et al., 2017). However, the study of cultural aspects in the design of platforms within non-Western contexts remains limited (Linxen et al., 2021; Sturm et al., 2015). In the specific case of WeChat, Holmes et al. (2015) note that the digital red packet feature on WeChat reflects the Chinese Lunar New Year tradition of exchanging red packets, showcasing the influence of guanxi culture, which is a vital cultural phenomenon in Chinese society, encompassing the dimension of face/mianzi and renqing/reciprocal favors (Chen, 2002, Chen et al., 2017). However, the embedded value of the platform, which might or might not be in line with traditional Chinese culture, is left without discussion. Wang and Gu (2016) argue that the unique designs of WeChat, such as Moments and Share to, align with collectivism, high power distance, and high-context orientation in Chinese culture. Nonetheless, the embedded value of

these unique designs and how users react to these unique designs remain less studied. Vodanovich et al. (2017) contend that WeChat incorporates three cultural attributes - respect for authority, guanxi culture, and politeness - through distinctive features like Subscribe functionality, Shake, People Nearby, and the visibility of comments among common friends on Friends' Circle. Yet, this argument is on the hypothesis level with limited empirical data to support it.

Previous research on the cultural values inherent in WeChat's design has yielded valuable insights. However, it is worth noting that the values or worldviews inherent in a platform's design may not be in accordance with mainstream cultural norms. Building upon these previous studies, the present research aims to further advance our understanding by focusing on comprehending the values and worldviews embedded within WeChat's unique design. Specifically, this study aims to investigate three main aspects: 1) the values and worldviews embedded in its designs, 2) the influence of Chinese cultural norms on the design, and 3) how users respond to and interact with these design features. By delving into these aspects, this research aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of WeChat's distinctive values or worldviews, the cultural norms that affect the designs of the platform, and their impact on user behavior.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the theoretical framework of cultural affordances proposed by Sun and Suthers (2023) to address the research questions. The framework includes three dimensions: cultural affordances of technology, cultural affordances of users, and affordances of the cultural. Before diving into details, it is important to note that affordances are potential opportunities for action rather than deterministic causes of action. Entities, whether human or non-human actors, have the choice to either take up these opportunities or not. Thus, these entities possess agency and are considered agents. In this research, agency refers to the ability to act upon oneself rather than upon others, in contrast to affordances that may potentially influence others.

Cultural affordances of technology describe what technology, as a particular environment, can offer to encourage, strengthen, discourage, or refuse certain behaviors or cultural norms within a society. They may or may not align with what users or cultural norms value or devalue. They recognize the agency of users and culture in engaging in these possibilities.

Cultural affordances of users describe what users can offer to other users, technology, and culture. They acknowledge the agency of other users, technology, and

culture in choosing how to respond to users' actions. For example, posting, liking, or commenting on a social networking site can offer affordances to other users to take further actions and affect the technology or cultural dynamics at play. Such actions reveal users' personal preferences that may align with cultural norms or deviate from them, and they can have an impact on cultural and technological changes.

The affordances of culture describe what the cultural environment can offer to users and technological platforms, and these offerings may or may not influence the design and usage of technologies. The affordances of culture acknowledge the agency of both technology and users in responding to the cultural context. They draw attention to how collective ways of thinking and doing, often taken for granted, can shape the use and design of technologies. These affordances also bring to light the unnoticed and subconscious aspects, revealing emerging norms and previously unknown factors at play.

In this empirical study, we examined the embedded values and worldviews of WeChat through its unique design, the cultural norms that influence the design, and users' reactions to the unique design of WeChat by applying this three-dimension framework of cultural affordances.

3. Methods

Data were gathered from February to October 2022, including 31 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 users who use WeChat as their primary social media platform as group one, 10 college students who use WeChat and other social media platforms as group two, and seven WeChat product managers and designers as group three. We also analyzed more than 13 hours of video recordings of WeChat Open Class Pro from 2016 to 2022. Based on the authors' two pilot studies (Sun & Suthers, 2022) and given the challenge of identifying participants from group three, the participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Additionally, two additional female participants in leadership positions and two elderly participants were added to group one for a broader participant composition. College students were included because they use other social media platforms in addition to WeChat. The study received approval from the institutional review board (IRB) at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. The participants came from Southern and Northern China, including Beijing, Inner Mongolia Province, Yunnan Province, and Zhejiang Province. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 73 years old, with 12 men and 19 women. (see Table 1 for group age range, gender, and occupation demographics). The criteria for recruiting participants for the three groups

were using WeChat as their primary social media platform for group one, using WeChat and other social media platforms such as QQ for group two, and having experience designing WeChat for group three. The first author conducted all 31 interviews via WeChat video chat due to the outbreak of COVID-19. All interviews took place in Mandarin, and each was 60-90 minutes long. After the interview, a follow-up discussion session was conducted to clarify and confirm related information. Each follow-up discussion session was 45-60 minutes long. We also observed participants' posts on WeChat. During the interviews, the first author took notes and kept audio recordings. These recordings were imported into NVivo, and the data were analyzed using the grounded theory techniques defined by Charmaz (2008, 2012).

The analysis began with "initial coding," in which short phrases were assigned as codes. The first round of coding was conducted line-by-line within the transcripts to maintain proximity to the data and keep an open approach. Examples of first-level codes included "spending excessive time on WeChat," "receiving work-related messages after 10 p.m.," and "stopping liking others' posts." Subsequently, the initial codes were analyzed, focusing on the most frequent or significant ones that could address the research questions. Second-level categories were developed, such as "having a feeling of losing control on Friends' Circle" and "finding the constant maintenance of relationships tiresome." The third-round coding was then conducted to extract and identify salient theoretical understanding that could address the research questions, including "always-on connectivity," "avoiding relationship termination," and "the emphasis on maintaining a harmonious relationship with others." The data collection and analysis process were iterative, involving continuous navigation between codes, categories, and theoretical understanding until new data did not add any further insights to categories and reached theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1969).

Group	Age Range	Gender	Occupation
Group 1 (14)	28-73	7M, 7F	12 Working Professionals 2 Senior Citizens
Group 2 (10)	18-22	1M, 9F	College Students
Group 3 (7)	25-35	3M, 4F	2 UI Designers 5 Product Managers

Table 1

4. Findings

4.1 Extended Immediate Always-on Connectivity

WeChat differs from QQ and other social media platforms by eschewing status options like "available," "busy," or "offline." This is a deliberate design choice of the platform. When discussing potential improvements to the platform, a former WeChat Product manager pointed out the missing status settings.

I hope that WeChat can provide the option to switch my status between office hours and after hours. When my status is set to after hours, I cannot receive work-related messages. It would also be beneficial if there were a notification to inform others that I am currently unavailable for work. My main goal is to ensure that others understand that I am not intentionally ignoring their messages.

In his book *The Product Concept Behind WeChat*, WeChat founder Zhang Xiaolong (2021) draws a comparison between WeChat and QQ, shedding light on this distinction.

Why do we believe that immediate contact is not possible through QQ? Because QQ provides information about the receiver's online status and allows users to set their status as offline even when they are online. Omitting the online/offline status creates the perception that WeChat is the platform for reaching out to someone for an immediate response. It gives the impression that users are always on WeChat (p.32).

It reveals that the omission of status settings is a deliberate design choice that aims to cultivate the perception that users are always active on WeChat and readily approachable at any time, transcending limitations of time and location. By eliminating status settings and adopting a mobile-based design, WeChat not only offers users always-on connectivity but also extends it further with the expectation of an immediate response. This feature sets WeChat apart from other similar applications and makes it the preferred choice for users who value constant connectivity and prompt responses from others. It uncovers the embedded value of the platform, which is to strengthen always-on connectivity on the platform.

Building upon this understanding, findings show that all group one and two participants, regardless of their genders, have spent excessive time on WeChat, such as constantly checking their messages and ensuring they provide immediate responses to others, especially for work-related communication. Significantly, 12 out of 14 participants from group one reported receiving work-related messages on WeChat outside regular working hours, and five admitted to only ceasing to check messages on WeChat when they went to sleep. For example, one participant shared the regular receipt of work-related messages on weekends.

Some of my business partners would text me on weekends or after hours. Initially, my reaction was to refrain from responding to them as I considered that time as my rest period. However, I couldn't blame them because I knew they had work-related tasks to complete during weekends. Eventually, I changed my perspective and started responding to their messages after hours, as it is a common practice in China.

By the same token, another participant noted receiving work-related messages on New Year's Eve.

On New Year's Eve 2021, everyone went out to celebrate. I was with my family at a restaurant, and we had plans later to watch the fireworks as part of the tradition. At 7:50 p.m., my colleague sent me a message requesting that I complete an urgent task by the end of the day. Thus, I could only briefly enjoy the fireworks before returning home earlier. I ended up working until 1 a.m. to complete the task.

Seven college students from group two acknowledged dedicating more time to WeChat to communicate with teachers and classmates for student-related tasks makes them anxious. For example, a first-year college student compared the difference when using WeChat and QQ.

I began responding to messages faster on WeChat since the messages are not only from friends but also from teachers or classmates and are related to work [in the students' union]. I noticed that everyone responds to my messages so quickly on WeChat, so I feel I should do the same. But I respond to all received messages on QQ every two or three days since most messages are from my friends and there is nothing too urgent there.

Not only do the participants' behavior change, but findings also show a notable shift in participants' attitudes towards WeChat, moving from embracing the platform to avoiding it with the feeling of tiresomeness and a loss of control. For example, a young professional mentioned feeling hesitant to respond to messages on WeChat outside of regular working hours.

I still respond to work-related messages while on my way home. Once I arrive home, I intentionally delay my responses by one or two hours. After 10 p.m., I strictly refrain from responding to work-related messages, as I want the senders to assume I have already fallen asleep. Since most of the messages I receive on WeChat are work-related, I generally avoid using the platform after work hours. This applies even if the messages are from my mom; I wait until the next morning to respond to her, along with the work-related messages.

Similarly, another participant who perceived WeChat as a personal communication tool also conveyed a passive attitude towards WeChat.

> *I have been actively avoiding WeChat lately. Since people can contact me at any time for work-related matters, I find it challenging to convey that I don't have the time or know how to respond to certain messages. As a result, I opt not to reply, although I recognize that this passive approach can feel evasive.*

In addition to avoiding WeChat, seven participants from group one acknowledged actively reducing their usage time on the platform.

4.2 Re-connectivity and Enhanced Group-oriented Connectivity

Re-connectivity on WeChat is facilitated through a distinct design feature that allows users to add someone back on the platform if the deletion was only initiated from one side. This design choice serves the purpose of preventing relationship terminations. For instance, if person A deletes person B on WeChat following a disagreement but later regrets their decision and wishes to restore the connection, person A can add person B back without triggering a notification, as long as person B has not deleted person A. WeChat does not notify users when they have been deleted by someone else, unlike QQ, where a contact is automatically removed from someone's friend list upon being deleted. This distinction, highlighted by multiple participants, represents a unique design aspect of WeChat despite both WeChat and QQ being products of Tencent. A WeChat product manager also confirmed that the absence of mutual deletion notifications is a deliberate design choice within the platform.

> *People from Eastern cultures place great importance on their social connections, and this sensitivity is reflected in their interactions on WeChat. We received users' feedback requesting a feature revealing who deleted them on WeChat. However, WeChat intentionally avoids implementing such a feature to prevent negative social impact. WeChat's design philosophy aims to minimize the possibility of openly conflicting with others, aligning with the fundamental approach to relationship management in Eastern culture. Additionally, it addresses situations where temporary conflicts may lead to deletions, as users can reestablish connections without the other party being aware of the previous deletion. This design approach can avoid abrupt relationship terminations by ensuring the other party remains unaware of the deletion.*

The intentional design of WeChat aims to maintain relationships and minimize its terminations. However, this design tradeoff requires users to invest additional effort and time in discovering who has deleted them on their own, which can be a time-consuming process, especially considering the large number of contacts users may have on WeChat. Participants in the study had an average of 1448 and 560 contacts in their respective groups. Not knowing who has deleted them while having a vast number of contacts on WeChat can lead to a sense of losing control and anxiety. For instance, one participant expressed concerns about the lack of control over knowing who has deleted them on WeChat.

> *Many WeChat users have suggested that WeChat should consider implementing a feature to show who has deleted them. Specifically, if I added someone on WeChat long ago and we haven't been in contact for years, the person may have deleted me from their WeChat. I believe WeChat should make some changes so that if someone deletes me, they are also automatically removed from my WeChat. QQ has already implemented such a feature: when someone deletes another user, both parties are simultaneously removed from each other's lists without disclosing who initiated the deletion. Currently, I have to manually check to find out who has deleted me and then remove them. It took me at least a couple of hours.*

Participants highlighted the unique design of mutual like notifications on WeChat's Friends' Circle, emphasizing its ability to foster increased interaction among individuals who are connected on the platform. This design feature enhances the group-oriented connectivity for users. Specifically, users not only receive notifications for updates from others but also for likes on the same post by mutual friends (Wang & Gu, 2016). For instance, if Person A likes a post shared by Person B on Friends' Circle, Person A will receive a red dot notification if Person C also likes the same post, provided that Person B is a mutual friend of both Person A and Person C.

This design enhances the sense of connection and engagement within the user's social network, promoting users to participate in conversations or discussions that involve three or more people. However, it's important to note that this design can sometimes lead to social exhaustion and a sense of losing control. For example, one participant from group one reported attempting to disable notifications for likes from other users on Friends' Circle.

> *To avoid missing messages or updates from others, I check WeChat whenever I see a red dot notification. However, I noticed that if I liked*

someone's post on Friends' Circle, I would continue to receive notifications with numbers indicating the likes on that post. Unfortunately, WeChat doesn't provide an option to disable notifications for likes from common friends. As a result, I have chosen not to like others' posts to prevent such notifications.

A college student expressed confusion regarding receiving like notifications from other users when they both liked posts published by their mutual friends.

I personally don't understand why I need to know who else has liked a post from a common friend. It's quite disturbing. It makes me lose interest in liking other people's posts because I don't want to be constantly disturbed by irrelevant likes that do not pertain to me.

The absence of deletion notification and the presence of mutual-like notification reveal how guanxi culture influences the design of WeChat, aiming to foster active guanxi within groups and prevent relationship breakdown. According to the product manager from WeChat, deleting someone and letting the person know can be perceived as "tearing off someone's face" or "reckless disregard for previous good relations," leading the other party to hold a grudge against the person who deleted them. It uncovers how face culture, as one dimension of Guanxi culture, influences the design of WeChat. Merely establishing a guanxi base is not enough; individuals must continuously develop, strengthen, and manage it as a long-term process (Fan, 2002). The cultivation and preservation of desired guanxi hold great significance in Chinese society (Buckley et al., 2006). In the context of WeChat, adding someone as a friend only establishes the initial guanxi base and does not automatically imply a developed or active guanxi relationship. An ongoing effort is required to nurture and maintain the relationship on WeChat. The feature of mutual likes notifications on Friends' Circle further encourages interaction among acquainted individuals, facilitating the management and maintenance of guanxi relationships. For instance, when person A posts a picture, persons B and C receive notifications if they both like or comment on the post. Person B can choose to respond to person C's comment to person A, if appropriate. Even if person B remains silent, they are still aware of the close guanxi between persons A and C.

4.3 Information Symmetry

Information symmetry, the principle of ensuring that everyone views the same content, is achieved by restricting editing published posts and deleting others'

comments on Friends' Circle. When comparing WeChat and other popular social media in China, a WeChat designer indicated that the inability to edit a post once it has been published on Friends' Circle is intentional.

Posts on Friends' Circle are not editable. Unlike platforms like Sina Weibo where users can edit their posts if they find a typo or want to add additional information later, WeChat does not provide such a function. This is because WeChat aims to maintain information symmetry for everyone. Allowing users to edit published posts would create information asymmetry, as different users would see different content. Therefore, preserving information symmetry is a fundamental principle of WeChat's design.

This restriction ensures that the information shared remains intact and promotes transparency and fairness among users who are acquainted with each other. It reflects the platform's underlying values of preserving information symmetry and equal accessibility to the same information. As a result, if a user wishes to make changes to a published post on Friends' Circle, they must delete the post and then republish it with the desired modifications. Similarly, users could not delete others' comments on Friends' Circle until August 2020, when WeChat version 7.0.15 was launched. It took WeChat approximately nine years to introduce this feature. The initial decision to disallow users from deleting others' comments aligned with maintaining information symmetry, ensuring all users have access to the same information while avoiding information discrepancies.

However, the restriction of editing a post or deleting others' comments on the Friends' circle may lead to users' feeling of losing control over their Friends' Circle. A senior working professional shared their thoughts on this matter.

Deleting a post or setting it as private was easier for me when others disagreed with my posts on Friends' Circle. It prevented my colleagues and supervisors from seeing the contentious comment. Engaging in back-and-forth responses would only prolong the discussion without reaching a resolution, and it became frustrating and time-consuming. Additionally, I was concerned about creating a negative impression by appearing argumentative, and I was uncertain how others would interpret my responses.

Similarly, findings from the study revealed a common tendency among participants from groups one and two to refrain from posting controversial issues on Friends' Circle. This behavior can be attributed to the platform's design philosophy of preserving information symmetry

and participants' desire to maintain harmonious relationships within their social network.

4.4 Platform-enabled Excuse-ability

Platform-enabled excuse-ability is made possible through the omission of the read receipt. Unlike other social media platforms such as Line or WhatsApp, WeChat does not notify users whether a message has been read or not by the receiver (Chu, Wang, & Deng, 2016). Thus, a sender can only know until the receiver replies. The WeChat team provides several reasons for this design. According to WeChat Help Center ("How Do I ", n.d.), this setting is due to the concern for users' privacy. Meanwhile, WeChat founder Zhang Xiaolong (2021) mentioned that the idea of adding the feature of read recipient on WeChat is "horrible" as it will bring more pressure on the receiving side, especially those who are in a lower position in a relationship since it is impolite to not reply immediately after reading the message. One senior WeChat product manager explicitly mentioned that the omission of Read Receipts on WeChat allows for more relaxed and stress-free communication.

> *Every design comes with its own set of advantages and disadvantages. Including read receipts in a messaging platform signifies increased accountability in information delivery. However, it also brings additional pressure to both the sender and the recipient. The sender may question if they have said something wrong or why there has been no response, while the recipient may feel the need to respond immediately. WeChat needs to decide what kind of product it wants to provide its users. It is related to the value of this product.*

This design demonstrates the embedded value of WeChat of prioritizing privacy and relationships over the accuracy of information delivery. The deliberate omission of the read receipt function releases users from the pressure of providing an immediate response, as the sender will not know when the message has been read. It allows the receiving side to make excuses for not responding promptly if needed. However, despite this design, findings indicate that most participants, regardless of their gender, still tend to provide an immediate response, especially for work-related communication with their supervisors. For example, a young working professional from group one mentioned the importance of responding to messages from bosses "in seconds."

> *Once I started working, I made it a habit to keep my phone with me at all times. This way, I could ensure that I could respond to messages from my boss immediately, even if messages came in late at night or early in the morning when I was still asleep.*

In this case, it is evident that cultural values such as a hierarchical culture and social-oriented culture have a significant impact on the way users utilize WeChat. This finding aligns with previous research, as highlighted by Tian (2021), who argues that users tend to respond promptly and courteously to their supervisors in WeChat groups even outside of regular working hours.

5. Discussion

As demonstrated above, WeChat's unique designs reflect its embedded values and worldviews, which are manifested through the platform's cultural affordances. These affordances shape user behavior by encouraging certain actions and discouraging others. One such design is the extended immediate, always-on connectivity achieved through the mobile-based design and the absence of an offline status option. This design choice signifies WeChat's understanding of communication: being constantly connected is advantageous for the platform, and providing an immediate response is preferred. This emphasis on immediate, always-on connectivity sets WeChat apart from similar platforms like QQ or Facebook in the West. While this design promotes active engagement and prompt responses, participants also reported spending excessive time on WeChat as they continuously check messages and ensure timely replies. While connectivity is considered the most prominent affordance of social media (van Dijck, 2013), overemphasizing it can lead to a backlash. The absence of the online status feature, particularly the offline option, disables users from 'disconnecting' from the platform, which may result in social media fatigue, even though its original intent is to foster closer connections. Findings also reveal that participants undergo an attitude shift from embracing the platform to avoiding it. This confirms the research by Fox and Moreland (2015), which highlights that connectivity can induce anxiety and other negative emotions. Furthermore, the stress of 'guanxi,' or maintaining harmonious relationships with others, further motivates participants to prioritize immediate responses, irrespective of the gender of the users. Therefore, designers should strike a balance between keeping users connected when necessary and enabling them to disconnect in a culturally supported manner. Significantly, WeChat introduced a new feature called 'My Status' in early 2021, allowing users to update their status with various categories and options, including a specific category called 'Breaks,' with resting options like 'Meditating,' 'Chillin' at Home,' 'Sleeping,' and more (Tindall, 2021). Future studies to examine whether

this new feature enables users to disconnect from WeChat could be conducted.

Re-connectivity is made possible through the special design that allows users to add someone back if the delete is not mutual without notifying the other side. The enhanced group-oriented connectivity is realized through mutual likes notifications. It uncovers the embedded values and worldviews of the platform: one shall actively maintain their relationships with others, the more interaction with others in a group the better a relationship will be maintained, relationship termination shall be minimized, and terminating a relationship can be temporary. Additionally, it demonstrates the influence of guanxi culture on WeChat's design choices. However, despite WeChat's efforts through these unique designs, the absence of deletion notifications can lead participants to feel a lack of control over their Friends' List, as they are unsure about who has access to their posts in Friends' Circle. The mutual-like notification feature also discourages participants from interacting with others, such as liking their posts, as they find the notifications irrelevant to their own posts and try to avoid receiving such notifications. This discrepancy further confirms the statement of Nagy and Neff (2015) that the intentions and perceptions of designers and users can misalign. Meanwhile, findings highlight the agency of users in reacting to what the platform or culture encourages them to do. It further shows that users may have their own values and preferences that may not align with those of the platform or the culture.

Information symmetry is maintained by preventing users from editing their posts on Friends' Circle, reflecting the platform's embedded value of prioritizing information transparency and fairness among acquaintances. However, this design choice can lead participants to feel a lack of control over their own posts, as they need to delete a post to make any changes after publishing it. This discovery is surprising, given that the ability to delete comments made by others is a common feature on other social media platforms such as Facebook (Dekay, 2012). Despite introducing the ability to delete comments in 2020, participants still refrain from sharing controversial content that may attract negative comments from others on Friends' Circle. This suggests that participants have developed a cautious posting habit on Friends' Circle from 2011 to 2020, and it may take time for them to adjust their behavior even with the added control over comments. This matter could be investigated in the future. Furthermore, other cultural values, including group harmony, guanxi culture, and prioritizing others before oneself, may also influence participants' posting behavior on Friends' Circle, further supporting this intentional design.

Platform-enabled excuse-ability is facilitated through the omission of the feature of read recipient. It uncovers the embedded value of the platform: not responding immediately might impact a relationship negatively, one shall not be pressured to provide an immediate response, and maintaining a relationship is more important than information delivery accuracy. It underscores the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship that can influence the design of WeChat. However, despite this design, participants still exhibit a tendency to respond promptly, regardless of gender, particularly when communicating with authorities. This demonstrates how cultural values, such as respect for authority, can influence users' behavior on WeChat. It also highlights the potential contradiction between the platform's values and the cultural norms that users adhere to. In this context, certain cultural norms hold greater influence than the platform's inherent values.

6. Conclusion

This research examines the embedded values and worldviews of WeChat through its special designs, users' responses to these designs, and cultural norms in Chinese society that can influence the design and ways of using the platform. The findings demonstrate that WeChat values immediate communication, frequent interaction within a group of acquaintances, and group harmony. Despite designers' efforts, users' priorities and preferences may not align with WeChat's intended values. Additionally, cultural norms such as guanxi culture and hierarchical culture can exert a stronger influence on users' behaviors and usage patterns on WeChat compared to the platform's inherent values.

This research has several limitations as well. This study primarily focuses on the special features of Friends' Circle, neglecting other distinctive features of WeChat and other social media platforms. Furthermore, the research primarily centers on the influence of guanxi culture and hierarchical culture, while there are other cultural dimensions in Chinese society, such as modesty, the doctrine of mean, and gender roles, that could also impact users' interactions on WeChat.

Future research should explore additional unique features of WeChat, compare these intentional designs with other popular social media platforms in China, and investigate the influence of various cultural concepts in Chinese society to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the platform's design and usage dynamics. It is also apparent from our results that WeChat started as a social media platform but ended as infrastructure, indispensable for users' daily lives. This transition merits further study. Additionally, comparing the intentional design of WeChat with social media

platforms in the West can yield valuable insights into the embedded values and preferences of these platforms.

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