WeChat Culture in Transition: Navigating Platform, User, and Tradition

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines recent cultural changes on WeChat resulting from the interplay between the platform, users, and Chinese culture. Employing a three-dimensional theoretical framework of cultural affordances, the research investigates the dynamics of cultural transformations within the WeChat ecosystem. Data collection involves 31 semi-structured in-depth interviews, follow-up discussions, and observations, analyzed using the grounded theory approach. Four main cultural shifts are identified: a transition from a personal and intimate culture to a more formal and professional one, an increased emphasis on immediate satisfaction and rewards, the emergence of an "everything-looks-fine" culture, and a reinforced high-context culture for self-presentation. The study also discusses the influential roles played by the platform, users, and cultural norms in shaping cultural change on WeChat.

Keywords: WeChat, Cultural Affordances, Chinese Culture, Cultural Changes, Self-Presentation

1. Introduction

Among various social media platforms, WeChat is regarded as the most influential one in present-day China (Chen et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2020). In 2021, WeChat founder Zhang Xiaolong reported that the platform has 1.09 billion daily active users (Yang et al., 2022). This extensive user engagement underscores the significant role of WeChat in the lives of Chinese users and sets the stage for examining the interplay between the platform, its users, and the influence of traditional cultural norms. Due to its indispensable role in people's daily lives, WeChat has garnered significant attention from researchers across various fields, including information systems, social media studies, and communications. Numerous investigations have been conducted to explore different aspects associated with the platform. In general, prior studies about WeChat can be categorized into six main areas: 1) examining users' motivations for WeChat usage, 2) investigating users' practices on WeChat, 3) exploring WeChat's impact on social and individual levels, 4) analyzing the dark side of WeChat, and 5) examining the design of WeChat. Prior research is crucial in terms of understanding WeChat. Yet, it often overlooks the cultural dimension when investigating these issues.

To elaborate, prior studies have shown that various factors can influence users' motivations for using WeChat, including passing the time, seeking entertainment and affection, connecting with friends, presenting oneself, and seeking or sharing information (Gan & Li, 2018). Research has indicated that users' emotions, trust, gender, age, and social and economic status can affect their usage patterns on WeChat (Gan & Li, 2018; Zhao & Zhang, 2020). Addiction to WeChat has been linked to users' emotional states and belief systems (Cao et al., 2020). However, the impact of Chinese culture on users' motivations and practices on WeChat remains largely unexplored despite the cultural nuances surrounding identities, emotions, trust, and certain beliefs. Previous research on WeChat design has focused on technological aspects, including functions like WeChat Wallet, the "red dot" feature, social network emphasis, sticky design, Time Limit setting, and WeChat mini programs (Peng, 2017; Zhang et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2022). However, how WeChat differentiates itself from Western social media platforms has not been fully addressed. The unique aspects of WeChat associated with its cultural context remain poorly understood.

Culture plays a significant role in shaping the design and usage of social media platforms (Vodanovich et al., 2017), and platforms can both uphold and create new cultural practices (Leaver et al., 2020; van Dijck, 2013). Platforms and their culture are widely studied in the West (e.g., Kemp, 2017; van Dijck, 2013). However, existing research on WeChat inadequately explores the influence of Chinese culture on design and usage patterns, the reciprocal impact on Chinese culture, and the presence of a distinct culture within the platform. Although examples like the digital red packet feature reflect Chinese traditions, the broader impact on guanxi culture remains unaddressed (Holmes et al., 2015). Furthermore, hypotheses about

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WeChat incorporating cultural attributes like respect for authority, guanxi culture, and politeness require further empirical support (Vodanovich et al., 2017).

To deepen our understanding, this study explores the cultural dynamics within WeChat resulting from the interplay among the platform, users, and Chinese culture. It aims to address two key research questions: 1) What are the notable cultural changes observed on WeChat since its inception in 2011? 2) How do these changes manifest and unfold? By delving into these aspects, this research seeks to shed light on the evolving cultural landscape within WeChat and uncover the mechanisms driving these transformations.

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. Both human and non-human actors have the choice to either take up these opportunities or not. Thus, they 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. Culture encompasses cultural values and practices, including both established and emerging ones.

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 users' preferences or cultural norms. They acknowledge 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 enable other users to take further actions and affect the technology or cultural dynamics at play. Such actions reveal users' own preferences that may align with platform-embedded values and 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 users' behavior on the platform. 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 shed light on the unnoticed and subconscious aspects, revealing emerging norms and previously unknown factors at play.

3. Methods

Data were collected from February to October 2022 through 31 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Participants included 14 WeChat primary users (group one), 10 college students using WeChat and other platforms (group two), and seven WeChat product managers/designers (group three). Based on the authors' two pilot studies on cultural affordances and WeChat (Sun & Suthers, 2022) and given the challenge of identifying participants from group three, purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed. Two additional female participants in leadership positions and two elderly participants were added to group one for a broader participant composition. Additionally, college students who used WeChat and other social media platforms as later adopters were added, contrasting participants from group one who only used WeChat as early adopters. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Hawaii at Manoa IRB. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin via WeChat video chat due to COVID-19, lasting 60-90 minutes each. Follow-up discussions of 45-60 minutes were held to clarify information. Participant posts on WeChat were observed. Data analysis utilized Charmaz's grounded theory approach (2006, 2008) using NVivo. Participants represented Southern and Northern China. The sample comprised 12 men and 19 women, ranging in age from 18 to 73 years.

The analysis involved an initial coding phase, where short phrases were assigned as codes to the data. First-level codes were developed through line-by-line coding of the transcripts. Examples included "posting less personal content," "using WeChat primarily for work," and "avoiding negative posts." These initial codes were then analyzed to identify frequent or significant ones addressing the research questions. Second-level categories were created, such as "WeChat's shift from personal to professional use" and "monetization of relationships." A third round of coding identified themes like "the emphasis on immediate rewards" and "everything looks fine on Friends' Circle." The analysis process was iterative, involving continuous examination of categories, themes, and data to uncover patterns.

4. Findings

4.1 From A Personal and Intimate Culture to a Formal and Professional Culture

The findings reveal a shift in the culture of WeChat from being personal and private to becoming formal and professional. To elaborate, when discussing their use of WeChat, eight out of 14 participants from Group One mentioned they have reduced or stopped sharing their private lives. Seven participants reported exclusively sharing news about their organizations or social events. For instance, when asked about changes in ways of using WeChat, a young working professional mentioned transitioning to primarily sharing work-related content.

> *I used to share many personal contents on WeChat, including my feelings and thoughts. However, I have become more cautious about revealing too much about myself. I have also come to recognize the limitations of my knowledge and the immaturity of my thoughts, particularly after interacting with numerous talented individuals. Currently, I mainly share articles for my organization, as I have more than 2800 contacts on my WeChat, most of whom are work-related.*

By the same token, several other participants also expressed that the longer they use WeChat, the more contacts they add on WeChat, and the more concerns they develop regarding sharing personal information on the platform. In the meantime, they also share a sense of obligation to share promotional articles for the organization they belong to on WeChat. The experiences of college students with WeChat support this notion. For example, a fourth-year college student described how they started to publish for their university.

> *I've noticed that many senior and junior students have been sharing promotional articles for the university, so I feel compelled to do the same. An alumnus consistently forwarded articles posted by my mentor about our university, and my mentor praised them, emphasizing how much they care about our university. It makes me feel like I am not doing enough.*

Significantly, the findings reveal that the posts and comments made by other users on Friends' Circle can have a notable influence on participants, motivating them to share more content related to their university.

The findings demonstrate a consistent tendency among participants to adopt a formal and professional communication style on WeChat, regardless of the type of relationship. This is evident when asking participants' responses to questions regarding behaviors they find irritating on the platform. For instance, a senior working professional provided insights into their perceptions of such behaviors.

> *I have a friend who frequently texts me in short sentences or calls me unexpectedly, which I find disruptive. I told them to summarize their message in one concise sentence and contact me through text first, as I might be busy. It's important to consider the recipient's convenience when communicating. I also avoid calling my friends without prior notice, as it can catch them off guard.*

The communication style between the participant and their friend appears to lean towards a formal and professional tone, which contrasts with the spontaneous, casual, or intimate style described by the participant when they initially used WeChat to communicate with others. Interestingly, the participant seemed unaware of this change. Similarly, a first-year college student further reported their distinct behaviors and usage patterns on WeChat and QQ.

> *I frequently check QQ to stay updated on the news from friends' groups and hobby groups. One interesting feature in QQ is the ability to speak anonymously, which I often use to avoid appearing ignorant or for playful interactions with my teachers. I feel that I can truly be myself on QQ. When I was in quarantine earlier, I had to use WeChat to communicate with the working staff and other individuals. It felt somewhat restrictive as I had to communicate in a formal manner. WeChat is commonly used by an older generation who have established a particular communication style. I had to learn and adjust myself to fit in on WeChat.*

Regarding adapting to the communication practices on WeChat, participants from group two mentioned the need to be mindful of their senior audiences on the platform. For instance, when comparing their postings on WeChat and QQ, a third-year college student stated.

> *On Friends' Circle, I usually limit my posts to once or twice a month. I am conscious of creating a positive impression for my audiences, such as my senior relatives and teachers, which restricts the content I can share. However, on QQ, I can post whatever I like because all my contacts are around my age.*

This contrast highlights how the participant acts differently on different platforms, displaying a formal and professional communication style on WeChat.

4.2 Culture on WeChat Focusing on Immediate Satisfaction and Rewards

Findings suggest a cultural shift on WeChat from stressing long-term gains towards prioritizing immediate satisfaction and rewards, reflecting a more short-term-oriented culture (Hofstede, 1991). This shift is evident at the behavioral and perceptual levels, with three notable aspects: provision and expectation of immediate responses, the prevalence of quantifiable, monetized, instrumentalized, and disposable relationships, and the increase in users' impulsive buying behavior. For the first aspect, participants from both group one (12 out of 14) and group two (eight out of 10) demonstrate a tendency for immediate responses, particularly for work-related messages. This cultural transformation is exemplified by the personal experience of a young working professional.

A customer posed a question to me for which I didn't have an immediate answer. Thus, I consulted my colleague before responding. My supervisor noticed this interaction in our WeChat group. Later, my boss messaged me separately, advising that I should have informed the customer that their message had been received and that a response would be provided soon. Honestly, I didn't perceive the situation as urgent. However, the purpose of providing an immediate response is to create a positive impression of our service. Gradually, I have noticed a change in my own expectations of others. For instance, when I seek assistance from others on WeChat, such as booking a yoga session at a studio, I feel slightly dissatisfied if the other party does not respond promptly. In such cases, I tend to call the studio to inquire. I adopt this approach when collaborating with others, and in return, I expect others to reply promptly to my messages.

In this case, it shows how the participant has recognized the need to respond promptly and how their expectations have changed regarding others' response times. Using one's own WeChat to provide an immediate response has become a common practice in the working environment and for personal communication. A senior professional provided further insight to interpret this transformation.

Once a message is sent on WeChat, the sender assumes that the receiver has read it and wonders why they haven't received a response yet. In the early years of WeChat, there wasn't such a sense of urgency, and it was acceptable to respond a few days later in similar situations. However, nowadays, people expect to receive a prompt response.

The second aspect highlighting the culture shift on WeChat towards immediate rewards or short-term orientation is the quantifiable, monetized, utilitarian, and disposable nature of relationships on the platform. For example, a young working participant from group one provided insights on how they assessed their relationships based on the number of likes received.

On WeChat, if I notice someone consistently likes posts from our mutual friends but never acknowledges my own, especially the important ones, it gives me the impression that they do not value our relationship. Although I may not voice my feelings, in my heart, that person and our relationship become less significant.

In this case, the quantifiability of relationships is evident through the number of likes as an indicator of closeness, in contrast to the traditional understanding of guanxi, which was difficult to quantify due to the inclusion of not only money or goods but also affect (Hwang, 1987).

On WeChat, the relationship can be monetized by providing immediate rewards. For example, as a team leader, one participant mentioned spending more money on WeChat to give digital red packets to their team members as a form of encouragement.

Every year, I give many digital red packets to my team members, and I wouldn't spend such a significant amount of money if it weren't for the WeChat Digital Red Packet feature. For instance, when we organize workshops, our team members invest considerable effort and time into their preparations. When the workshops turn out successful, I typically reward the entire team with a digital red packet to motivate them and encourage their continued dedication. All the funds come from my personal pocket.

Traditionally, red packets were given on specific occasions like the Chinese Lunar New Year, weddings, or birthdays (Wirth, 2017). However, with digital red packets, this practice has become more frequent and expanded to new scenarios, providing an immediate reward to recipients (Wu & Ma, 2017; Xu, 2021). This example highlights the monetization of relationships, in line with findings from prior studies that indicate a growing trend of giving red packets on various occasions and providing immediate rewards to recipients (Wu & Ma, 2017; Xu, 2021). Likewise, a college student shared their experience of receiving a digital red packet from an alumnus in their program.

A fellow alumnus reached out to me on WeChat, requesting the study materials I used to prepare for the postgraduate entrance examination, as they were interested in applying to the same university where I had recently been admitted. I shared all my study materials with them. In a gesture of gratitude, the alumnus offered me a digital red packet twice, feeling indebted for the favor.

However, I declined both times, considering helping them a natural obligation.

This practice not only monetizes the relationship on WeChat but also strongly emphasizes the immediate return of a favor. Another college student mentioned giving a thank-you red packet to another student, explaining, "Sometimes when I need to ask for a favor, like if I ask someone to attend a student meeting on my behalf, I will give a digital red packet worth less than 20 RMB (2.91 USD) as a treat for a milk tea." Several students said they would offer a digital red packet in a WeChat group when requesting others to complete a questionnaire. This finding aligns with prior studies highlighting the exchange of red packets to express gratitude on WeChat (e.g., Xu, 2021; Zhou et al., 2020). Arguably, providing a digital red packet when asking for a favor has become a new norm on WeChat.

Relationships on WeChat can be easily terminated, reflecting a cultural shift towards immediate satisfaction and short-term orientation. Participants from groups one and two both revealed their tendency to delete contacts whom they no longer remember or have lost connection with. For example, many participants mentioned deleting people they don't remember without inquiring about their identity. They also periodically review their contact lists and delete those they don't recognize, who never post on Friends' Circle, or with whom they no longer communicate. This behavior reflects the culture of prioritizing immediate connections and discarding inactive or unfamiliar relationships on WeChat, in contrast to the practice of maintaining long-term relationships with each other when they first started to use WeChat.

The final aspect that highlights the shift towards a short-term-oriented culture on WeChat is the inclination to engage in impulsive purchases, often realizing later that they don't actually need the items. In contrast, participants express that they are more likely to give a second thought if the payment is made in cash. For example, one young female participant shared their personal experiences of purchasing goods on WeChat, which exemplifies this behavior.

I follow many WeChat public accounts that publish articles that include a purchasing URL link at the end, allowing readers to buy the mentioned products instantly. Sometimes, I'm surprised and disappointed if the purchasing link is missing, especially when I'm ready to purchase after reading an article. But if I need to pay in cash like before, I probably will not buy it.

WeChat public accounts provide direct links to the WeChat Store and WeChat Pay, allowing users to purchase products or services based on their recommendations (Chen et al., 2019). The authors (2019) highlight that buying behavior on WeChat is often impulsive rather than planned. Findings show that participants' experience aligns with this trend, as they sometimes make spontaneous purchases after reading an article without prior deliberation, contrasting their purchase behavior in the past, which involved extensive decision-making or planning.

4.3 A Everything-Looks-Fine Culture is Developed on WeChat

The culture on WeChat has shifted from presenting various aspects of life and actively exchanging opinions on different topics towards an everything-looks-fine culture within Friends' Circle and WeChat Groups, characterized by surface-level harmony. This cultural change is manifested through participants' behavioral and perceptual transformations in three distinct ways: 1) prioritizing posting content that exudes positive energy, 2) refraining from sharing content that is critical, controversial, or negative, and topics that may evoke disagreement or controversy, 3) avoiding engaging in debates with people who hold differing opinions. To elaborate, four participants from group one consistently used the term "positive energy, "which is associated with being positive, encouraging, and embodying a healthy and optimistic outlook (Hird, 2018), to describe the type of content they consider suitable for posting on Friends' Circle or sharing in WeChat groups. When asked about appropriate content to share on WeChat, a fourth-year college student emphasized the importance of posting positive while avoiding negative content.

When posting on Friends' Circle, I prioritize sharing about my study sessions, workouts at the gym, or the positive TV dramas I watch. All my posts are intended to give others the impression that I am doing well and leading a healthy life. In our tradition, we only report good news and never mention bad news to our family. I don't want them to worry about me. My family prefers seeing the positive stuff. Whenever they see me posting something negative, they remind me to focus on the positive aspects.

Participants' inclination to share positive aspects and avoid negative aspects on social media aligns with previous research (e.g., Brosch, 2016), and indeed goes back to research on image management and self-presentation prior to social media, such as Goffman's self-presentation theory, which posits that people tend to present their idealized self in front of others (Goffman, 2002). Moreover, the participant's description illustrates a shift in what they consider appropriate to post on WeChat, highlighting the

influence of authority and cultural norms ingrained in Chinese society.

Participants also avoid sharing content about controversial or critical issues or debating with others with different opinions or worldviews. For instance, one professional in their 30s stated that when they post their opinions on controversial issues on Friends' Circle, their father becomes worried, "I had to hide my posts from my parents since they would tell me not to post certain content that they considered inappropriate." Furthermore, this participant's supervisor expressed concern about the potential negative impact on the company's image after seeing the posts. Later, they limit the visibility of their posts to three days. Similarly, a college student highlighted the difference in posting the same controversial topics on WeChat and Sina Weibo.

> *I am concerned about how my acquaintances on WeChat perceive me. Since I often meet them in person, I worry that they will judge me based on my posts. When I once shared something about feminism, a senior individual commented that it was too extreme. In contrast, I feel more at ease on Sina Weibo because the people who follow me there share similar interests and worldviews.*

In disagreement, participants tend to pretend to support the other side rather than actively engage in a discussion, as they used to do. A senior working professional shares their thoughts on this matter.

> *If someone leaves a negative comment on my posts on Friends' Circle, I no longer have the desire to engage in a debate as I used to. I choose not to engage further and simply acknowledge their perspective as right. I don't feel obligated to explain myself. I'm tired of interacting with people who hold different opinions, so at most, I like posts that align with my own views. Nowadays, I rarely comment on others' posts.*

An additional five participants from group one reported that they no longer try to explain themselves to people who do not share a similar worldview or lifestyle. According to these participants, engaging in such conversations is often seen as problematic or disobedient by others. Instead, they choose to delete a post if it invites different opinions.

4.4 High-context Culture is Strengthened on WeChat

Findings reveal that the practice and reinforcement of high-context culture are evident on WeChat. Context refers to the information required to comprehend the meaning of a situation, and there is a distinction between high-context and low-context cultures (Hall, 1989). In a high-context culture, information is primarily implicit,

and individuals anticipate that others grasp the intended message without needing explicit specificity (Hall, 1976). Meanwhile, emphasizing images, symbols, and icons aids communication in such cultures (Ahmed et al., 2009). The collected data reveals three distinct ways high-context culture is practiced and reinforced on WeChat: 1) indirectly disciplining others within WeChat groups, 2) conveying implicit messages or expressing emotions on WeChat, and 3) sharing images with minimal or no accompanying descriptions.

To elaborate, six participants from group one and five from group two disclosed that they utilize WeChat to exert influence on others or be influenced by them without engaging in direct communication. For instance, a senior manager indicated their approach to influencing others through sharing or reposting articles on WeChat.

> *I often share articles I find valuable with my child and team members on WeChat. For example, when I came across a video promoting the importance of reading among young people, I shared it with my child, who spends a lot of time playing video games. I believed that watching the video would effectively convey the message without me having to give them a lecture. Within our WeChat group, I often share articles on enhancing teamwork with my team members. I believe that at least some, if not all, of the team members will read the articles and get my point.*

This case exemplifies how people exercise influence over others in a much easier manner by sharing content on WeChat without explicitly stating their opinions.

Six participants from group one and one from group two mentioned that messages, emotions, and relationships could be expressed implicitly on WeChat. One such example is replying to others over a longer time, which can serve as an indirect way to express dissent or discontent. For example, a young female participant from group one reported using this strategy at times.

> *I do not like it when my supervisor uses an imperative tone when speaking to me. However, talking to them directly will not change anything based on my previous experience. Therefore, I choose not to reply to them immediately, as I typically would, to express my feelings.*

As mentioned earlier, most participants from groups one and two expressed their inclination to respond to messages as quickly as possible. Therefore, intentionally delaying or not responding promptly has started to carry implicit messages. It sheds light on the distinctive design of WeChat, the agency of users, and certain cultural values and practices within Chinese society. This strategy can also be utilized by people who

are in a higher hierarchical position. For instance, a third-year college student described how their professor expressed disapproval or discontent through WeChat.

When my professor communicates, I sense underlying meanings beyond the surface level, which can involve two or even three layers of meaning. If I grasp the deeper meaning conveyed by their words, my professor will respond to me. Yet, if I merely respond based on the surface-level interpretation or in a casual manner, my professor will not respond, as they may perceive it as a sign I have not fully understood their intended meaning, which could result in their dissatisfaction.

In this case, the student is required to speculate and interpret the true intention behind their professor's words. If they fail to do so, they will not receive a response from the professor, thereby reinforcing the high-context culture.

Implicit messages can also be conveyed through liking practices on Friends' Circle. A senior student shared an example of how their mentor utilized likes on Friends' Circle to communicate various messages to their followers, including their students.

When all the other students and I post the same content on our Friends' Circles, and my mentor gives likes to other students but not to me, I interpret it as a sign that they are mad at me. There are instances where my mentor only gives likes to their friends and colleagues who repost their papers but not to their students. It seems to indicate a specific type of order. Sometimes my mentor likes anyone who reposts their paper, signaling its importance to them. There are also times when they don't like any of the reposts, suggesting that the paper may not hold much significance to them.

In this case, giving or not giving likes enables users to express emotions, navigate various relationships, and convey messages indirectly on WeChat.

Participants predominantly use images with minimal or no description when sharing personal content. Only one participant from group one continued to share their personal life without limiting post visibility, with 121 out of their 163 posts from February to October 2022 being image-oriented. However, only 20 posts provided sufficient information for clear understanding, while the rest lacked or had brief descriptions. When describing their sharing practice on Friends' Circle, this participant explains their reluctance to post text-only updates.

Using texts allows for more precise and clear expression. Yet, I don't feel I can fully express myself as desired on Friends' Circle, compared to when I started to use WeChat. That's why I prefer posting images rather than text these days.

Three college students did not limit the visibility of their Friends' Circle. Among the three, one made 16 posts, including 11 image-centered posts and five text-only posts; another student shared nine posts, including eight image-centered posts with short descriptions and one text-only post; and the third student published 46 posts comprising 33 images and six short videos. The descriptions accompanying these visual-centric posts were brief, often containing only a few words. It can be challenging to comprehend the implicit meaning behind these posts. When asked why they posted images without additional explanations, the third student expressed their intention to avoid excessive explanations, "A screenshot is enough. Only people who play this video game understand what I mean. I don't need to let everyone understand me."

5. Discussion

Upon further analysis of the collected data, it becomes apparent that the cultural changes observed on WeChat are influenced by multiple factors, including the platform itself, the users, and cultural norms in Chinese society. In other words, the cultural affordances of WeChat, the cultural affordances of users, and the affordances of the cultural all play an essential role in developing these cultural transformations.

Specifically, WeChat offers users acquaintance-oriented connectivity, reward-ability, platform-enabled excuse-ability, and image-centered express-ability through its unique designs. The primary purpose of WeChat is to facilitate communication among users and their social networks, including family members, friends, and acquaintances, rather than connecting with strangers based on common interests. Moreover, WeChat primarily targets professionals or adult users who do not use QQ (Liu & Wu, 2018). Consequently, the longer one uses WeChat, the more their contacts consist of acquaintances such as colleagues, supervisors, classmates, teachers, or distant relatives rather than immediate family members or close friends. As a result, WeChat offers users acquaintance-oriented connectivity, enabling communication not only with close friends but also with a broader range of individuals, including work-related acquaintances. This study updates prior research suggesting that the communication style on WeChat for personal and professional communication can be less formal (e.g., Ding et al., 2018; Ju & Shoham, 2019). In contrast, findings showcase that the communication style on WeChat has shifted towards a more formal and professional manner, shaping the type of content users share and cultivating a specific culture on the platform.

Reward-ability is achieved through features such as Likes on Friends' Circle, Digital Red Packets, Dashang or Fan Funding, WeChat Public Account (PA), WeChat Mini Program (MP), and WeChat Pay. These features create a system where users can receive instant rewards and satisfaction from others or offer them to others, allowing users to quantify and monetize their relationships on WeChat.

Platform-enabled excuse-ability is achieved through the omission of the Read Receipts feature, consistent with the observation of Ahmed and Nunes (2020). This intentional design aims to provide users with a convenient excuse for not responding immediately. Yet, the finding shows participants still strive to reply promptly due to cultural concerns, contrasting the study of Ou and Lin (2023), which suggests users can leverage this intentional design as a "tech-resist-tech" strategy to not respond immediately. Consequently, making a late reply carries significant meaning, such as expressing dissent or disapproval, enabling users to implicitly convey their emotions rather than doing so directly, and further shaping the high-context culture on the platform.

The image-centered express-ability on Friends' Circle prioritizes visual sharing, such as pictures or short videos, over textual or text-only sharing. To elaborate, the standard way of publishing a post on Friends' Circle is to include at least one picture before typing any text. No text is required as long as there is a picture. In contrast, posting texts without pictures is more complicated: users need to select the Discover tab at the bottom of the page, choose Moments from the list that appears, long-press the camera icon in the top right, and then they can make a pure text post. This finding challenges Wang and Gu's (2016) study, which suggests that posting text-only posts can be conveniently done. Additionally, WeChat did not officially promote the pure-text function after launching it (Wang, 2016). This intentional design encourages users to share more image-oriented content rather than text-focused content on Friends' Circle, further cultivating the high-context culture while discouraging users from text-oriented expression on the platform.

The findings indicate that the cultural affordances of other users, including their silent presence and practices, play a crucial role in transforming the culture on WeChat. For example, subordinates are concerned about how their supervisors view them based on their behavior on WeChat. College students as later adopters perceive themselves as constantly observed and judged by the early adopters, including parents and teachers. Consequently, they tend to adopt a formal communication style, sharing content considered appropriate by others and using an implicit approach for self-expression on Friends' Circle. Other users'

practices, such as sharing valuable content in WeChat groups to influence others (e.g., children or subordinates) to adopt certain values, liking and praising a student on Friends' Circle to encourage other students to emulate the desired behavior, and responding slowly to convey a sense of dissent or rejection indirectly, encourage participants to conform to certain norms and values within the WeChat community.

Certain cultural values and practices, including hierarchical culture, group-oriented culture, and guanxi culture, serve as cultural affordances and play a significant role in shaping WeChat's culture. In Chinese society, there is a strong emphasis on respecting authority figures such as family elders, teachers, and group leaders (Lockett, 1988; Yau, 1988). Conversely, authorities are expected to provide guidance to those in lower positions (Yau, 1988). Consequently, participants on WeChat consider these authority figures as their imagined audience and feel compelled to show respect by adjusting their behavior, using a formal communication style, posting content they believe the authority would appreciate, and avoiding sharing content that may not align with their preferences. Thus, the culture on WeChat has shifted to a formal and professional one. The emphasis on respecting authorities also explains why participants in leadership roles noted that they could influence others simply by sharing an article in a WeChat group without extensive explanation, as a practice of high-context culture on WeChat. In Confucian culture, the self is not seen as an isolated entity but is understood in relationships with family, community, and the broader world (Gao, 1998). People tend to prioritize the interests and goals of the group over their own (Zhu et al., 2007). The group-oriented culture encourages participants to use their personal WeChat accounts to promote their companies or universities rather than for self-promotion, making the platform less personal or intimate. Guanxi, as an essential element of Chinese culture, refers to a special social connection or social network where group members seek out others to fulfill their needs based on mutual interests and benefits (Hwang, 1987). Merely establishing a guanxi base is not enough; individuals must continuously develop, strengthen, and manage it as a long-term process (Fan, 2002). In the context of WeChat, guanxi culture encourages users to manage their guanxi network by reading, liking, or commenting on others' posts in a positive manner, further encouraging the emergence of an everything-looks-fine culture. Renqing, a key aspect of guanxi, entails the obligation to reciprocate favors after receiving them (Fan, 2002). The practice of renqing emphasizes reciprocity, and failing to repay a favor is considered ungrateful and can strain relationships (Luo, 2007; Su & Littlefield, 2001). Consequently, individuals strive to

avoid indebtedness and fulfill their social obligations. Within the WeChat context, giving likes or digital red packets enables participants to promptly reciprocate the renqing or favor they have received from others, further cultivating the short-term-oriented culture.

One dimension of cultural affordances alone cannot explain those cultural changes. It results from the interaction and interplay among three dimensions of cultural affordances. For instance, some participants might not feel obligated to use WeChat for work-related communication if other users preferred alternative methods like emails or phone calls or if the culture did not emphasize the guanxi culture despite WeChat not displaying offline status. Furthermore, while WeChat offers immediate rewards through features like Likes on Friends' Circle, WeChat Red Packets, and WeChat Pay, the culture on WeChat might not be sufficient to prioritize immediate rewards and satisfaction if other users preferred cash transactions or if the cultural practice of giving red packets or emphasizing renqing were absent. Despite WeChat being designed based on acquaintances, participants might still post critical or controversial content if the cultural emphasis were not on maintaining harmonious relationships and other users did not provide negative feedback.

6. Conclusion

This study identifies four cultural changes on WeChat and examines their development through the platform, users, and cultural norms. The limitations of this study include a relatively small sample size, the potential for unexplored cultural shifts on WeChat, the influence of other Chinese cultural norms on the platform's culture, and the need for further exploration of the relationship among the platform, users, and cultural norms. Future research should address these areas.

7. References

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