

# Using Social Media for Business Communication: A Symbolic Interaction Perspective

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## **Abstract**

It is important to understand the symbolic meaning of social media perceived by users in a particular communication context, as it may completely deviate from designers' original intentions. In the exploratory case study of Moon Struck hotel in China, we investigate how customers interpret this hotel's use of WeChat (the most dominant instant messaging tool in China) for business communication and how customers respond to the messages received from WeChat in this context. Leveraging the symbolic interaction perspective, we report that customers' interpretations towards the symbolic meaning of WeChat vary across personal and business communication contexts, and subsequently affect customers' usage behaviour of WeChat. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 12 selected followers of the hotel's WeChat account, as well as company executives at this hotel, we identify the key findings and discuss the theoretical implications and practical recommendations.

**Keywords** Symbolic meaning of technology, Social media, Business communication, Symbolic interaction perspective, China

## 1 Introduction

Given the unprecedented popularity of social media, companies diligently engage on different social media platforms, e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Weibo and WeChat. According to a WeChat Open Class held by Tencent<sup>1</sup> in Shanghai, until July of 2016, there were more than 20 million WeChat official accounts<sup>2</sup> and millions of companies had engaged in social media marketing through WeChat<sup>3</sup>. Due to the advantages associated with supporting interactive and immediate communications, social media has been touted as a magic bullet that can help companies increase brand awareness (Goh et al. 2015), build close relationships with customers and thus increase customer loyalty (Yadav and Pavlou 2014). It is believed that messages on social media can trigger customer information sharing and brand awareness (Stieglitz and Xuan 2013). Meanwhile, the Word of Mouth behaviour in social media is also proved to have effects on the growth of customer numbers (Trusov et al. 2009).

Whereas companies have grown accustomed to pushing messages to customers through various social media tools, companies are “mere nodes in the complex networks” where messages may be propagated, attenuated or even misunderstood by customers (Aral et al. 2013). Yadav and Pavlou (2014) point out that a key issue in current social media research is to understand how effectively organizations interact with customers via social media. In order to address this issue, it is necessary to shift the focus of research from the company side to the customer side. Whether customers would like to engage in business communication with companies through the same technology they use for personal communication is unknown, yet is important because companies should not necessarily jump to the conclusion that they can effectively engage with customers through social media channels in business communication.

Therefore, in this paper, we address the following question: *How do customers interpret and respond to a company’s use of social media for business communication with them?* In order to answer this question, we draw upon symbolic interaction theory (Mead 1934). Symbolic interaction theory suggests that how individuals respond towards an object can be explained by their interpreted symbolic meanings towards it under a particular social context. Following this theory, a technology may represent radically different meanings for users across different social contexts and for different purposes. The contexts which a user encounters have a significant impact on the building or modification of symbolic meanings (Miranda and Saunders 2003), which provides a basis for his/her subsequent usage behaviours. Through this theoretical lens, we compare the symbolic meanings of a social media tool and the consequent impacts on usage behaviours in the personal and business communication contexts. Engaging in an in-depth investigation of a hotel’s use of a social media tool, we contribute to research by highlighting the distinction of symbolic meanings associated with a technology across different social contexts and how these constructed meanings influence their behaviours across different social contexts.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we review the current literature on symbolic interaction theory and the symbolic meaning of technology. We then describe our research context and research methods before presenting the case data. We conclude the paper with the discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of the proposed approach.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Symbolic interaction theory

Symbolic interaction offers a sociological perspective that is influential in sociology and social psychology (Turner 2006). According to Mead’s (1934) seminal research, the underlying assumption of symbolic interaction theory is that people act on the basis of meaning, which is developed and modified through social interaction. Humans are considered to be “symbol-creating animals”, who interpret and make sense of their own social situations (Aakhus et al. 2014) and then react to the situations, rather than directly react to the situations. Symbolic and action are highlighted as two key terms. Here a symbol is taken as the interpretation and representation of something and action refers to doing and responding (Aakhus et al. 2014). The process whereby the symbolism of an object shapes and influences an individual’s responses and behaviors are termed as enactment (Gopal and Prasad 2000). For example, the meanings attached to social media may exert a considerable influence on how people perceive the

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<sup>1</sup> Tencent is the development company of WeChat.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.techweb.com.cn/internet/2016-07-19/2362972.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> <http://daxue.qq.com/content/content/id/2622>

technology and thereby influence the way they use that technology. It is noted that enactment is a dynamic and iterative process. Thus, the attached meanings and individual responses to that meaning are inextricably intertwined during social interaction, not isolated from each other.

Symbolic interaction focuses on understanding the inconsistent and conflicting “local meanings held in multiple contexts” (Prasad 1993), rather than the shared meanings across contexts. For symbolic interactionists, certain terms such as love and freedom may be symbolically perceived as having similar meanings at a broad societal level, but they still contain various, even contradictory, meanings and images for people from a particular background or context (ibid). In other words, the social context in which an individual is encountered contributes to his/her interpretations of a certain term (Miranda and Saunders 2003). Meaning derives from dynamic and changeable social contexts, and is not simply stable and constant. Therefore, a particular word, such as technology, may have different connotations for people play different roles and in different situations, and thereby needs to be understood as such. In recent years, symbolic interaction theory has been imported in the field of management, including organizational behavior (Dionysiou and Tsoukas 2012), human resource management (Zott and Huy 2007), and information systems (Aakhus et al. 2014; Miranda and Saunders 2003).

## 2.2 Intrinsic and symbolic meaning of technology

Technology as an object represents both intrinsic and symbolic meaning (Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. 2014; Markus and Silver 2008). The intrinsic meaning corresponds to objective or inherent features of the technology independent from its use and the context in which the technology is used. Previous research mainly focused on exploring the intrinsic meaning of technology, which is known as a technology-focused perspective (Jung and Lyytinen 2014; Markus and Silver 2008; Tan et al. 2014). From this perspective, the inherent feature of a technology contributes to IT use patterns and downstream performance impacts. The underlying assumption is that individuals use technology exactly in the way it is designed to be used across different contexts. However, as the inherent feature of technology reflects the intention of designers more than users, it may not be sufficient to explain users’ diverse usage patterns of a particular technology (Markus and Silver 2008). Users’ perceptions and interpretations towards a technology may completely deviate from the way designers build the system, because users are likely to utilize only limited aspects of the system (DeSanctis and Poole 1994, p.126).

The symbolic meaning of technologies is elaborated by DeSanctis and Poole (1994) with the concept of “spirit”. They suggest that spirit of a technology be defined as “the general intent with regard to values and goals underlying a given set of structural features”. Similarly, Fulk (1993) contends that it is necessary to understand how technologies are characterized socially through the attached connotations by users. The idea of symbolic meaning of technologies embodies two insights, namely that (1) it is a general meaning, which is characterized holistically as properties of a technology rather than separate components and (2) it is socially constructed, which must be understood dependent on the social context.

The current surge in sociomaterial theorizing (e.g., Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. 2014; Markus and Silver 2008) opposes the dominance of research on inherent meaning of technology and instead acknowledges that a comprehensive understanding of technologies requires us to consider symbolic meaning as well. However, the main focus of sociomaterial theorizing is on the inherent meaning and its relationships with symbolic meaning (the so-called entanglement of the social and the material) (Aakhus et al. 2014). Sociomaterial theorists have less interest in exploring how symbolic meanings are generated by individuals under different contexts and how these meanings lead to individual behaviors. In this regard, symbolic interaction theory provides a more nuanced perspective to understand users’ interpretations of a technology under a particular context and their individual behavioral responses to it. Notably, our intent is not to validate the original theory of symbolic interaction. Instead, we use this theory as a theoretical lens to capture users’ interpretation and responses towards social media, e.g., in personal and business communication contexts.

## 3 Research Context and Methodology

Inspired by the idea of symbolic interaction, we conducted an exploratory case study that focused on the mechanisms by which users interpret a social media tool and respond to it under different communication contexts.

### 3.1 Research Context

The context of our research is a luxury hotel, which we refer to as Moon Struck, that operates in Guangzhou, China. Moon Struck is a five star hotel managed by a global hotel management company.

Motivated by the popularity of social media in China, Moon Struck started its WeChat official account in early 2014.

WeChat, which is the most popular social media now in China, currently has 650 million monthly users<sup>4</sup>. It connects people in an exclusive circle of real friends, rather than strangers from a virtual world, which leads to high levels of sharing, reading and interaction. There are two types of WeChat accounts: personal and official. A personal account allows for individual communication (one-to-one or one-to-many individuals), while an official account allows for communication between a company and its followers (one company to many followers).

Moon Struck's official WeChat account allowed it to reach followers directly by sending a weekly e-journal on every Friday. Five to six messages are included in a weekly e-journal focused on promotions of the hotel's offerings and upcoming events. In addition, Moon Struck's official WeChat account was connected to the hotel's room booking website and its WeChat shop. As Moon Struck lacked the technical skills to manage its WeChat account, it outsourced the detailed design and implementation to a third-party provider.

Moon Struck's executives were ambitious in their plans for WeChat marketing. The resident manager of Moon Struck contended: "WeChat is very popular in China. Every Chinese uses it to chat every day. It provides us with a wonderful opportunity to contact our customers. Our customers can now communicate with us directly through this account, just like they do with their friends. We have already attracted more than 10 thousand followers on WeChat. Through WeChat, we can build close links with our followers and increase their loyalty. Most importantly, we believe that WeChat can bring us revenue: it will help us to convert followers into customers".

The Marketing and Communication department was responsible for the management of the WeChat account. The head of marketing communication department said:

"Almost every hotel has a WeChat account nowadays and we cannot fall behind. We have invested a lot of effort to promote our WeChat accounts offline and attract followers. People may be concerned that a five-star hotel is too expensive to be afforded. WeChat can help us to narrow the distance with our customers".

By the end of July, 2015, more than 10,000 people appeared to be following Moon Struck's WeChat account. However, although the hotel celebrated achieving this large number of followers, it experienced difficulties in realizing its ambition of converting them into customers who could contribute to the hotel's revenue stream. The page view for WeChat messages was quite low, around 300-1000 for each message, which was rather disappointing considering the large number of followers. More seriously, the sales volume through WeChat was close to zero. Clearly having a large number of followers did not mean that the hotel benefitted from increased revenue, whether of rooms being occupied or other hotel facilities (restaurants, spa, etc.) being utilised. Indeed, it is fair to say that Moon Struck neither knew anything about the followers themselves, nor even whether the followers wanted to use social media as a communication channel. They had no idea what the followers wanted and so were unable to satisfy them.

Given the dichotomous situation of a hotel that is apparently popular, with a large number of followers, yet with no discernible impact that can be attributed to having these followers, we decided to investigate further, helping Moon Struck to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of its WeChat account in terms of achieving business value.

### 3.2 Data Collection

In this paper, we draw primarily on interview data to construct a case study (Walsham 2006). Specifically, we try to understand the symbolic meaning of social media as interpreted by individuals when they use it to communicate with companies. Furthermore, we sought to explore how individual users act and respond to messages received from social media, considering the symbolic meaning of those messages. In order to accomplish these objectives, we collected a rich set of data related to the interpretations and use of WeChat from followers of Moon Struck's official WeChat account.

As followers' profiles (except followers' icon, WeChat ID and name) are anonymous to official accounts on WeChat, we conducted an online survey in order to learn more about the followers e.g., demographics, experience with the hotel, and experience with the hotel's WeChat account before we conducted the interviews. Invitations to participate in an online survey were sent to all 10,000+ Moon

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<sup>4</sup> <http://sanwen8.cn/p/2d8rZBg.html>

Struck WeChat account followers through the hotel’s regular weekly business communication’s WeChat “e-journal” on two consecutive Fridays: 30 July 2015 and 7 August 2015. A CNY100 (approx USD15) coupon that could be redeemed at the hotel was offered to each respondent as an incentive to complete the survey. We collected respondent’s WeChat ID to filter the overlapping data. Among the 10,000+ followers who received the message, 401 and 332 of them read the survey invitation messages on the two occasions respectively, which was consistent with the low page view of WeChat messages. Among the 733 followers who read the invitation messages (401+332=733), 235 visited the online survey website during 30 July to 24 August, though only 161 valid responses were received. In order to identify whether the survey respondents are existing regular, new, or potential customers, we include such questions in the survey, such as “how often do you visit the hotel; what have you purchased in the hotel; and how much would you like to spend per night for accommodation?”.

Based on the quality of responses, we followed a theory-based replicative sampling process (Yin 2009) and identified an initial set of 15 respondents for follow-up interviews to avoid bias towards a particular group, e.g., income level, gender or job. Considering that customers who have followed the Moon Struck WeChat account are most likely the regular customers of this hotel. In the interviewee selection process, we deliberately selected four respondents who have never come to Moon Struck and might be potential customers in the future. In September 2015, these 15 respondents were invited for an afternoon tea party and interviews in the hotel. In total, 12 followers participated in the interviews. These followers were randomly divided into five focus groups on two consecutive days. Each focus-group interview lasted 50-70 minutes, with an average length of 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for later analysis. The online survey was bilingual in both Chinese and English, and the follow-up interviews were conducted in Chinese. We reached data saturation (Yin 2009) with this group of 12 interviewees and therefore did not collect more data. Demographics of interviewees can be found in Table 1.

<b>Age</b>		<b>Gender</b>	<b>Place of Residence</b>		
21-25	1	Male	4	Guangzhou	11
26-30	5	Female	8	Xiamen	1
31-35	6	<b>Education Level*</b>	<b>Employment Status*</b>		
<b>Monthly income (RMB)*</b>		High school diploma	1	Student	1
3001-6000	3	College	2	Business Owner	1
6001-9000	7	Bachelor's degree	8	Full time working	9
9001-12000	1	Note: * some interviewees didn't provide all demographics.			

Table 1. Demographics of 12 interviewees

The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol comprising two major sections. In the first section, interviewees were asked to answer general questions about their usage behaviours on WeChat and opinions about WeChat official accounts. Questions such as “What do you use WeChat for?” and “How do you think about WeChat official accounts in general?” were designed to encourage the discussion. In the second section, we asked specific questions about their experience with following Moon Struck’s WeChat account. Questions such as “Why do you choose to follow Moon Struck’s WeChat account?” and “How do you think about the WeChat messages sent by Moon Struck?” were designed to solicit their more detailed opinions. In addition to these formal interviews, we engaged in casual conversation before and after interviews, during the afternoon tea party. Furthermore, we had also the opportunity to engage in conversation with employees from the marketing and sales divisions of the hotel. While documents did not constitute a major data source, we have collected background data from this hotel’s WeChat account.

The interview data was coded and analyzed following the bottom-up process suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Firstly, the authors coded each transcript (a single uninterrupted interviewee response) and identified tentative concept names for all the transcripts. Then we grouped the concepts into themes. We next identified overarching themes to integrate those separate but related themes by iteratively comparing the material within and across themes (Young et al. 2012) before producing a detailed concept map. We iterated through the coding scheme five times before reaching a final version. The complete version of the final concept map is available from the authors. Finally, we identified four

overarching themes, thirty-one sub-themes, and thirty-five tentative concepts, each of which is illustrated by interview quotations. According to the structure of our concept map and the corresponding transcripts, we present our case study below. Supporting statements from interviewees are cited as appropriate.

## 4 Findings

From the data transcription and analysis, we found that followers of Moon Struck generate different symbolic meanings of WeChat across communication contexts, and accordingly change their WeChat usage behaviors. Therefore, the basic meta-structure of the case study involves two parts. The first part relates to followers' interpretation and usage behaviors towards WeChat when they communicate with friends and co-workers through personal accounts, that is, under the personal communication context. The second part relates to followers' interpretations and usage behaviors towards WeChat when they communicate with Moon Struck through its official account, that is, under the business communication context.

### 4.1 Under the Personal Communication Context

#### 4.1.1 The roles followers play and the construction of symbolic meaning of WeChat

Under this communication context, followers intend to use WeChat to build relationships with strangers, or to maintain relationships built in the offline social network. As one informant commented "I use WeChat to know how my friends' lives are going on, especially those living abroad. I cannot meet them frequently". Followers would like to engage in direct communication and interest sharing with friends or co-workers via WeChat. Therefore, the role followers play under this context is that of an online interlocutor and a relationship builder or maintainer. As an informant indicated:

"WeChat is so powerful and it is for free. Almost everyone is using it. Even though you can still contact with people without using WeChat, you had better use it if you want to contact them easily. For example, I use it when I want to organize parties, to hang out with friends. Sometimes, I use it to communicate with colleagues".

Based on the role they play, followers construct the meaning of WeChat, such as a networking tool for free. In addition, WeChat is characterized as a tool for sociality (i.e., relationship building and maintaining). It is useful to receive/send updated information among friends and to social with friends even with physical distance. Thirdly, followers perceive personal accounts on WeChat as a personal representative. With respect to the nature of WeChat, words such as private, intimate and personal were frequently used.

#### 4.1.2 Entanglement of symbolic meaning and followers' action

Based on the symbolic meaning of WeChat, people develop their expectation towards communication on WeChat, e.g., informal communication style; high communication frequency; relationship-oriented communication. As an informant indicated: "Communication on WeChat is casual as it is just between my friends and me. Sometimes I chat with friends and sometimes I may communicate with colleagues at work".

Following these expectations, followers have particular behaviors when using WeChat in this communication context. Firstly, they use WeChat and check messages frequently. Communication with friends happens anytime and anywhere, as a result, ubiquitous. Secondly, information received in this context is less likely to be ignored on WeChat. As one informant indicated: "I cannot miss any messages from my friends. Sometimes I am too busy to read some messages. But I will check it back when I am free". Thirdly, communication with friends on WeChat is interactive and immediate, but also can be rehearsed.

It is notable that the way in which followers don't use WeChat following the constructed meaning of technology would exert a reversed effect. For example, when friends start to sell on WeChat, their followers may not be able to escape from the sales advertisements. In this case, users think WeChat has changed from a sociality focused (relationship building or maintaining tool) to a sales channel. Then, they may hide or remove these friends who sell on WeChat in order to avoid the inconsistency of symbolic meanings that they perceived. As an informant indicated:

"Using WeChat to follow a personal account is different from following an official account. I follow people on WeChat because they are my friends. We can communicate and share interesting things in our life. Some friends who live aboard may post pictures of luxury bags, shoes or makeup on WeChat

and sell to WeChat friends. I don't like my friends doing this kind of things. If one of my friends does it, I may be puzzled how or why she does this. I follow her because she is my friend. I will hide her information (don't receive messages) if she keeps on selling on WeChat. It will be better if she opens a new account for WeChat selling instead of using her personal account".

## **4.2 Under the business communication context**

### **4.2.1 The roles followers playing and the construction of symbolic meaning of WeChat**

Our data indicates that followers have different purposes when they decide to use WeChat to follow Moon Struck, i.e., engaging in business communications with the company. Firstly, acquiring information is an important purpose. Followers take the initiative to follow some accounts to learn about a company, and to receive discounts and promotions. For example, when asked why he decided to follow Moon Struck on WeChat, one informant answered: "I am the member of this hotel and when I travel somewhere, sometimes I choose to stay in this hotel. I want to know if there are any interesting events or promotions, so I follow its official account. No matter where I go, I can receive information on my phone". Secondly, followers use WeChat to obtain rewards or incentives. As one informant commented: "When I came to this hotel, people came to persuade me to follow their official account. I can get a spa coupon if I become the follower. Why not? Then I forgot to press the unfollow button and the account stays in my WeChat contact list. That's why I have followed so many official accounts". Entertaining is the third kind of purpose. Followers check messages from Moon Struck's WeChat account to kill their time. Jokes and games embedded in some WeChat messages sent by Moon Struck are appreciated by followers. Therefore, the role which followers play in this context is an information seeker, a benefit pursuer and a time killer.

Based on the role which they play, followers construct the meaning of WeChat. Firstly, they take WeChat as a portable sales-related tool that enables companies to reach potential customers at anytime and anywhere. As one informant indicated: "WeChat is just another format of advertisements; there is no big difference from print advertisements. It may be new to customers as customers can receive it no matter where they go. I have to sit there to watch TV advertisements. But when I use WeChat on my phone, advertisements go with me".

In addition, followers may take WeChat as a branding-related tool representing the image of Moon Struck and helping the hotel to maintain public relationships. Some informants contend that companies are cautious about what they say through WeChat and information sent by Moon Struck on WeChat should be filtered by executives. Employees who are responsible for managing Moon Struck's WeChat account need to get permission from their senior managers before posting material. Therefore, WeChat is not only a communication channel between customers and employees who manage this WeChat account, but is also a public relationship (PR) platform of the hotel.

Some followers consider WeChat to be a powerful information gathering tool. As one informant indicated, "If you want to know everything in the world without going outside, WeChat is your best choice. I have followed more than 50 official accounts, which helps me a lot to update information".

As indicated above, WeChat is characterized as a sales-related, branding-related and information gathering-related tool. Words, such as impersonal, formal and official, were repeatedly used by informants when they described their feelings towards WeChat in terms of following Moon Struck's account. Interestingly, an informant claimed: "WeChat is just a robot. I won't have any attachment to the Moon Struck WeChat account and won't build a personal relationship with it".

### **4.2.2 Entanglement of symbolic meaning and followers' action**

Based on the symbolic meaning of WeChat, people develop their expectation towards communication on WeChat. Firstly, Moon Struck's account should represent the hotel officially and be consistent with its brand image, for example, using a formal and professional communication style rather than an easy and relaxed one. In addition, followers have no interest to receive too frequent information from the official account as it is just an advertisement platform. Thirdly, they expect high information quality and better typesetting design to increase visual appeal. At last, followers appreciated short and concise WeChat messages since these messages were perceived as being less interruptive.

Contrary to the situation with personal accounts, users' behaviors towards an official account are different. Firstly, even though all followers use WeChat frequently, it doesn't mean that they read messages from official accounts frequently. Each informant follows twenty to thirty official accounts on average and some informants said they have followed more than 50 official accounts on WeChat.

Considering the large number of followed official accounts, with each account sending five to six messages every week, every informant receives 100-200 messages from official accounts each week. All informants complained about the information overload they get from official accounts and the limited amount of time they have to read these messages. Therefore, followers normally check messages from official accounts less frequently than from friends as reading business messages takes up so much time.

In addition, followers are selective about messages. They ignore those messages that are not attractive or in which they have no interest. Thirdly, when they receive a message, they read it fast by skimming the title and key words, and then they decide if they want to continue reading it. Fourth, even though most informants agree that they check WeChat messages as quickly as possible, they only check messages from official account at a particular time, e.g., on the way home, lunch break, after work, rather than at the time they receive the message. As indicated by an informant:

“I won’t check messages from official accounts at the time they send to me. The company won’t die if I miss some messages from them. But if my friend sends me a message that he is waiting for me, I have to check it as quickly as possible. Otherwise he will be mad at me. But an official account is different. I have followed so many official accounts and I am so busy. I normally read messages from official accounts when I have free time, such as in a boring meeting or during the traffic. And I am not patient to read them one by one. I only read those I am interested in. I look at the title to see if it is interesting”.

Even though interactivity is appreciated on WeChat under the personal communication context, followers prefer a low level of interactivity when engaging in business communication. As one follower commented:

“Interaction with Moon Struck’s account is hard, because Moon Struck’s account is a company representative and thus every message it sends to me must be approved by managers. I appreciate interaction on WeChat, but it is no possible to do with official account. If I send a message to the hotel’s official account, it will only reply to me during working hours. In addition, it won’t reply me immediately because it may not have a specific employee responsible for answering questions on WeChat. I will feel disappointed. Thus, I won’t send messages to Moon Struck’s account. If I want to do it, I will choose phone or email instead of WeChat”.

As indicated, the informant interpreted WeChat as an official branding channel for the hotel instead of a personal communication tool. Even though interactivity is appreciated when she engages in personal communication on WeChat, she realizes that these expectations may not be reached under the business communication context. Therefore, her action was changed based on the meaning of WeChat. We summarize the above symbolic interpretation processes in the two different communication contexts in Table 2 in the next section.

## 5 Discussion

In this study, we argue that individuals’ interpretations towards the meaning of technology and their responses vary across different communication contexts. Symbolic interaction theory suggests that social interaction is symbolic, which is processed in terms of the meanings people attach to things (Trevino et al. 1987). The main idea of this theory includes the attached symbolic meaning, i.e., WeChat is characterized as a private communication tool, and actions are based on the meaning, i.e., it is frequently used to communicate with friends. As symbolic interaction theory is a ground theory, it provides generic ideas such that individuals’ behaviors towards an object can be explained by their interpretations towards the object derived from social interactions. Our data broadly supports the main idea of symbolic interaction theory, and thus may be seen as empirical support for applying this theory in the IS context. However, we also go beyond this ground theory to examine the detailed and structured process whereby people interpret and respond to a technology in different contexts.

In the case of Moon Struck, we found that the role played by the followers of Moon Struck’s WeChat account in two distinct communication contexts affects their interpretation of WeChat, and subsequently affects their downstream expectations and actions towards the technology. Specifically, in the personal communication context, followers play the role of an interlocutor, specially a communicator, and a personal relationship builder or maintainer. In this context, WeChat is characterized as a personal communication tool for users to fulfil their roles and achieve their purposes; followers respond to messages from WeChat based on the constructed interpretation. They frequently use the technology and messages are checked at any time. They prefer to read messages at the time when they receive them and generally don’t ignore messages. High interactivity is appreciated under this communication context. In contrast, in the business communication context, the roles users play can be characterised as an information collector, a benefit pursuer and a time killer. Thus, WeChat is regarded



as a sales platform, a branding channel for PR information, or an information disseminating tool. Accordingly, followers generate a different set of actions towards WeChat. Compared to the personal communication context, the frequency of using WeChat and checking messages is lower in the business communication context. In addition, the time spent on reading messages is much shorter. Reading information is delayed until followers have sufficient time to do it. A lot of information is simply ignored and interaction is considered as unnecessary.

<b>Symbolic Interaction Process</b>	<b>Personal Communication context</b>	<b>Business Communication context</b>
<b>Purpose of Using WeChat</b>	Sociality; Personal image building	Collect information; Obtain benefit; Entertaining
<b>The User's Role playing</b>	Interlocutor	(Passive) information receiver; Benefit seeker; Time killer
<b>Symbolic Meaning of WeChat</b>	A networking tool	A sales tool; A branding tool; An Information dissemination tool
<b>Expectations towards The Communication on WeChat</b>	Informal communication style; High communication frequency Relationship-oriented communication	Formal communication style; Low communication frequency; High information quality; Visual appeal; Short and concise messages
<b>Communication Action on WeChat</b>	Relationship-oriented; High reading frequency; Long reading duration; Ubiquitous; Low level of information ignorance; High level of interactivity; High level of immediacy; Sales information avoiding	Transaction-oriented; Low reading frequency; Short reading duration; Particular reading times & locations; High level of information ignorance; Low level of interactivity; Low level of immediacy

*Table 2. The symbolic interaction processes at WeChat under two communication contexts*

In addition to enhancing the existing literature on symbolic interaction theory, we contribute to current IS research with respect to the symbolic meaning of technology. Firstly, although individuals' interpretation of the meaning of technology has been explored in previous work, it is regarded as having a unitary meaning regardless of context. For example, Tan et al. (2014) note that email and SMS carry different symbolic meanings and individual responses to these two technologies depend on whether the meaning fits the cultural environment. In their study, users in different contexts may respond differently to a technology, but the symbolic meaning of a technology is consistent across different cultural contexts. Markus and Silver (2008) contend that an IT artifact may convey different symbolic meanings for a specific user group. However, they fail to identify how exactly a technology represents different meanings for a user group in different social contexts. Importantly, we abstract the key symbolic communication processes and also the attached meaning of social media as interpreted in the interaction process. Such abstractions provide a conceptual ground for future research to investigate the key symbolic meanings of social media theoretically. Secondly, we identify the relationship between user interpreted symbolic meanings of a technology and the usage behaviors of this technology. Even though users' contrasting usage behaviors of the same technology have been widely researched before (e.g., Saed and Abdinnour 2013; Stein et al. 2015), little attention has been paid to investigating this issue by examining the symbolic meaning of the technology. Our research opens vistas for future research to further investigate how users construct symbolic meanings of technology differently, and the relationship between symbolic meaning and technology use. Further research may also elaborate on the

difference between intrinsic and symbolic meanings so as to offer better accounts of the nature of a technology. Considering our interviews only included the perspectives from those followers who have proactively joined in our survey, inviting those silent or non-followers in such a study will provide richer viewpoints from different kinds of existing and potential customers.

## 6 Conclusions

Even though most research into the use of IS has focused on the intrinsic feature of a technology, the symbolic meaning of technology has caught the attention of a few scholars (e.g., Gopal and Prasad 2000; Miranda and Saunders 2003; Scott and Orlikowski 2014). The symbolic meaning of technology perceived by users is necessary to be understood as it reflects users' understanding towards a technology, which may completely deviate from that of the technology designers. In this paper, we report on a situation where a company's ambition in using WeChat to build a close relationship with customers is not feasible, as this ambition is not consistent with customers' interpretation of WeChat in a business communication context. Specifically, companies take for granted that customers will use WeChat to receive business information in the same way that they receive personal information. However, based on the different symbolic meanings of WeChat in business and personal communication contexts, we find that followers respond to WeChat messages in different contexts differently. We suggest that a learning organization should listen to customers' opinions with respect to companies' use of social media for business communication. In other words, companies should design their digital business strategy based on customers' interpretation of a particular technology.

In addition, our study seeks to provide suggestions for designers of social media. Currently, social media designers try to achieve the balance between attracting active individual users and earning money from corporate users. Thus, designers develop functions to support both personal communication and business communication. However, we observe that individual usage behaviour on social media is completely different in these two communication contexts. For example, the frequency of using WeChat to check messages and the overall level of interactivity is lower for business communication than for personal communication. Therefore, although a social media tool can be used to support business communication, it may also lead to individuals interpreting social media as facilitating sales instead of personal communication, with a consequent reduction in both frequency of use and interactivity. In the long term, we suggest that the number of individual users may decrease. Social media designers need to consider carefully in-dividual users' constructed symbolic meaning of the technology when they develop new functions.

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