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Chunmei Gan Weijun Wang

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Uses and gratifications of social media: a comparison of microblog and WeChat

Uses and gratifications of social media

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Chunmei Gan

School of Information Management, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China, and

Weijun Wang

School of Information Management, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to explore the general and specific gratifications obtained from using microblog and WeChat.

Design/methodology/approach – To shed light on the difference of gratifications to use microblog and WeChat, 18 interviews with social media users in China were conducted.

Findings – Results reveal that three types of gratifications were obtained from using both microblog and WeChat: content gratification, social gratification and hedonic gratification. Also, the strength and components of each gratification for microblog and WeChat were different. Content gratification plays the most salient role in using microblog, while social gratification is the most important for WeChat usage. In addition, content gratification of microblog usage is related to information seeking and information sharing, while social gratification of WeChat usage is constituted by private social networking and convenient communication. Furthermore, content gratification of WeChat usage refers to high-quality information provided and information sharing, and entertainment and passing time develop hedonic gratification of microblog usage, while that of WeChat usage refers to entertainment.

Originality/value – Extant research has mainly focused on the gratifications of one social media and lacks studies comparing the motivations in using different social media. Also, only little research has identified the components of different gratifications and how they affect the adoption of different social media. The current study attempts to fill these research gaps.

Keywords Microblog, WeChat, Social media, Gratification, Uses and gratifications, Motivation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media such as WeChat and microblog have become increasingly popular in people's daily life. The *microblog* is a free service that enables users to send messages in real time, and entries of microblog are restricted to a limited number of characters (e.g. 140 characters) (Liu *et al.*, 2015). And *WeChat* is a mobile service that provides users a convenient way to communicate via text and voice messaging, to share ideas and location (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WeChat>). According to a report released by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the number of microblog users



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in China has reached 249 million at the end of 2014, accounting for 38.4 per cent of all Internet users (CNNIC, 2015). And by the end of March in 2015, WeChat reached 549 million monthly active users (Tencent, 2015). Furthermore, CNNIC (2014) noted that main functions used by WeChat users include: voice chatting, text chatting, friend network (e.g. share texts and photos with trusted friends), group chatting, online games and online shopping, while microblog users mainly use the following functions: focusing on news/hotspot, focusing on interested people, information sharing, information transmitting, watching video and listening to music. We could find that microblog and WeChat provide different functions to users, and some of their functions are similar. However, users usually embrace multiple social media as part of their communication repertoire (Quan-Haase and Young, 2010). As the report issued by iResearch (2014) stated, 23.8 per cent of users use only one social media, and 41.8 per cent of users use two social media simultaneously. Prior studies have showed that one social media does not completely replace another, and each social media may satisfy different user needs that the other cannot completely fulfill (Ku *et al.*, 2013a, 2013b). This implies that though some social media have similar functions provided to users, different gratifications drive people's adoption of different social media. This raises an important research question:

RQ1. What are the motives that drive people's choice of different social media? Specifically, what are the differences of their gratifications obtained from using microblog and WeChat?

In the literature, a growing number of information system (IS) studies have adopted the uses and gratification (U & G) theory to explain why people choose to use a particular social media, such as instant messaging (IM) (Lo and Leung, 2009), social networking service (Alhabash *et al.*, 2014; Ku *et al.*, 2013a, 2013b), Twitter (Han *et al.*, 2015; Yoo *et al.*, 2014; Coursaris *et al.*, 2013) and Facebook (Alhabash *et al.*, 2014; Zhang *et al.*, 2011). In addition, some researchers attempt to compare gratifications from using different social media (Ku *et al.*, 2013b; Ha *et al.*, 2015). For example, through three empirical surveys on social networking service, IM and e-mail, Ku *et al.* (2013b) revealed four general gratifications among the three technologies, that is relationship maintenance, information seeking, amusement and style. Moreover, specific gratifications were found: the sociability gratification sought from using IM and social networking sites and the gratification of kill time sought from using IM.

Prior studies have mainly focused on gratifications obtained from one social media, and the comparison of gratifications from using two social media is less considered. In addition, though previous research reveals the general and specific gratifications obtained from different social media, only little research has examined the components of gratifications and how they affect users' adoption of different social media. Thus, taking microblog and WeChat as examples, the current study attempts to examine different gratifications obtained from using microblog and WeChat and also to identify components of each gratification.

In this research, the empirical data were collected among social media users in China via in-depth interviews. The objective of this study is to explore the general and specific gratifications obtained from using different social media and their components. In doing so, this research sheds light on the usage behavior of social media in relation to gratifications, thus adding more knowledge to our understanding of the subject. In

addition, the comparison of microblog and WeChat will offer a more complete understanding of why people choose to use a particular social media.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Theoretical background on the U & G theory is provided in the next section. Section 3 describes the research design and data collection. The research findings are presented in Section 4, and Section 5 follows up with a discussion. Section 6 puts forward implications and limitations.

2. Theoretical background

First developed in radio communication research, the U & G theory has been widely used in mass communication research. The U & G approach provides a user-centered view to identify the social and psychological motives that drive individuals' use of a particular media (Leung and Wei, 2000). It focuses on why people choose one media over alternatives to gratify a variety of needs (Katz *et al.*, 1974). According to the U & G theory, people are active and can meet their requirements to use some particular media based on their needs. Their needs provoke motives that affect media use, which leads to their cognitive, affective and behavior outcomes (Katz *et al.*, 1974).

The U & G approach provides "a nomological network for research rather than providing a predefined set of constructs or factors" (Li *et al.*, 2015). It has been widely applied to various traditional media research and the Internet research, such as television (Babrow, 1987), newspaper (Elliott and Rosenberg, 1987), e-mail (Dimmick *et al.*, 2000) and the Internet (Stafford *et al.*, 2004).

Recently, a growing stream of research adopts the U & G approach to explain individuals' use of social media. For example, through 25 in-depth interviews, Whiting and Williams (2013) identified ten types of gratifications for using social media, that is, social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing and surveillance/knowledge about others. Lo and Leung (2009) revealed the following gratifications sought from IM usage: peer pressure/entertainment, relationship maintenance, free expression and sociability. Xu *et al.* (2012) found that social network usage were predicted by utilitarian (rational and goal-oriented) gratifications of immediate access and coordination, hedonic (pleasure-oriented) gratifications of affection and leisure and Web site social presence (Table I).

Hence, the U & G approach is adopted as the research framework in the current study to examine individuals' use of microblog and WeChat. First, the U & G approach provides a user-level perspective in understanding media use, and it fits within the research context; second, the U & G approach fits well into the motivation research in the context of the hedonic IS usage (Li *et al.*, 2015). As voluntarily used by individuals, individuals choose to use microblog and/or WeChat to fulfill their various needs. Thus, the U & G approach is suitable in the current research to better explore why individuals choose to use two different social media and what types of gratifications individuals can obtain from using these social media.

Prior studies have categorized gratifications for using different media into several groups. Stafford and Stafford (1996) put forward two types of gratifications: content gratification and process gratification; content gratification is related to the message itself, while process gratification is related to the communication process itself.

Later, Stafford and Stafford (2001) identified another gratification: social gratification, which refers to the communication with others. Venkatesh and Brown (2001) found that

Social media	Gratifications	Study
IM	Peer pressure/entertainment, relationship maintenance, free expression and sociability	Lo and Leung (2009)
Social network	Relationship maintenance, information seeking, amusement, style and sociability	Ku <i>et al.</i> (2013)
	Utilitarian gratifications, hedonic gratifications and Web site social presence	Xu <i>et al.</i> (2012)
Twitter	Hedonic, utilitarian and social appearance values	Yoo <i>et al.</i> (2014)
Facebook	Entertainment, information sharing, media appeal, escapism, socialization, self-documentation, self-expression	Alhabash <i>et al.</i> (2014)
	affection, attention seeking, disclosure, habit, information sharing and social influence	Malik <i>et al.</i> (2015)

Table I.

Gratifications from social media uses

Notes: Summarizes the previous findings of studies which apply U & G theory to explore the gratifications for social media usage

hedonic IS use is driven mainly by the hedonic outcomes, utilitarian outcomes and social outcomes, and hedonic outcomes refer to the consumption or use of a product, while utilitarian outcomes are related to the effectiveness. Based on the previous findings of gratifications and considering the current research contexts of microblog and WeChat, the following three types of gratifications, content gratification, social gratification and hedonic gratification (Stafford *et al.*, 2004; Van der Heijden, 2004), are proposed as a preliminary list of gratifications for using microblog and WeChat. The definitions and descriptions of the three gratifications are summarized as following:

- (1) *Content gratification*: Content gratification refers to the fulfillment of information expectation. It consists of information-related factors, such as information seeking and information sharing.
- (2) *Social gratification*: Social gratification is related to the fulfillment of social expectation. It is composed of factors such as social interaction and social networking.
- (3) *Hedonic gratification*: Hedonic gratification is related to the fulfillment of hedonic expectation. It consists of the following factors: entertainment and passing time.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research design

Applying the U & G theory, this study attempts to explain why users choose different social media (i.e. microblog and WeChat). Two stages were adopted for the research design to achieve the research aim.

First, we conducted in-depth interviews to collect data to validate and modify the preliminary list of gratifications. An in-depth interview is suitable because the aim of the current research is to explore why users choose to use a particular social media.

After data collection, we adopted content analysis for analyzing the data. The researchers independently read and reviewed responses from interviewees and extracted possible gratifications based on the preliminary list of gratifications. For those gratifications that did not appear on the list, we listed them as a new group. Also, we discussed the responses which

we did not agree with each other. For those, we had different opinions after discussion; we read prior studies for further confirmation and, finally, reached an agreement. After data analysis, we got the final list of gratifications to answer the research questions.

3.2 Data collection

The interviewees were university students in their second or third year from one university in south China. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the number of interviewees for interviews should be at least 12. So 18 interviewees are considered appropriate in this study. Two pre-interviews were conducted before the final interviews so as to check out the questions. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in one of the researcher's office in one month, and each interview lasted for 45 to 60 minutes.

Table II shows the descriptive statistics for interview samples.

No.	Gender	Grade	Major	Experience for using microblog	Experience for using WeChat
*	Female	Sophomore	Library science	2 years	1 year
*	Male	Sophomore	Library science	3 years	2 years
A	Female	Sophomore	Information management and information system	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year
B	Female	Sophomore	Library science	3 years	2 years
C	Male	Sophomore	Archives science	5 years	4 years
D	Male	Sophomore	Information management and information system	2 years	2 years
E	Male	Sophomore	Library science	3 years	1 year
F	Female	Sophomore	Library science	4 years	3 years
G	Male	Sophomore	Information management and information system	3 years	3 years
H	Female	Sophomore	Archives science	2 years	Less than 1 year
I	Female	Sophomore	Archives science	5 years	4 years
J	Female	Junior	Information management and information system	5 years	4 years
K	Male	Junior	Library science	1 year	2 years
L	Male	Junior	Archives science	1 year	1 year
M	Female	Junior	Information management and information system	2 years	Less than 1 year
N	Male	Junior	Library science	3 years	2 years
O	Male	Junior	Archives science	4 years	3 years
P	Female	Junior	Library science	3 years	3 years
Q	Male	Junior	Information management and information system	1 year	1 year
R	Female	Junior	Archives science	4 years	3 years

Table II.
Descriptive statistics for the sample
($N = 2 + 18$)

Note: The first two samples with * were invited for pre-interviews

4. Findings[1]

4.1 Motivations to use microblog

Seven motivations are identified for individuals to use microblog. They are discussed in details as following.

4.1.1 Information seeking. Information seeking refers to using microblog to acquire information that people are interested in. Microblog offers a variety of information generated by individuals and organizations. Of all, 15 (83.33 per cent) interviewees reported using microblog to seek information, such as information about social events and news, history events, work and studies.

Interviewee C said: "Microblog can provide different types of information, I like topics such as 'hot topics', 'hot post in 24-hour' and 'specially focused topics', so as to quickly seek information on what happened".

Interviewee A referred to use microblog for: "seeking information about studying aboard, such as introduction of universities and majors, daily study and life on some particular universities".

4.1.2 Social interaction. Social interaction is related to using microblog to maintain friendships or meeting new people (Ellison *et al.*, 2007). Microblog enables people to interact with any other users ranging from acquaintances, new friends and even famous people. Of all, 13 (72.22 per cent) interviewees mentioned using microblog for social interaction.

Interviewee J said that: "Microblog can help me quickly know what happens on my friends and communicate with them; also, I can pay attention to those who share similar interests with me".

Also, interviewee D mentioned that: "I can keep in touch with others, talk anything with them, even we do not meet each other Face-to-Face. Microblog expands my social life online".

4.1.3 Entertainment. Entertainment refers to using microblog to have fun, pleasement and amusement. Microblog provides a variety of ways to bring entertainment for users, such as interesting posts and videos and online games. Of all, 13 (72.22 per cent) interviewees reported using microblog for entertainment.

Interviewee B mentioned that: "Microblog brings me much fun. I can always find interesting videos or posts. I enjoy it".

And interviewee Q said that: "I like playing games in microblog platform, especially with friends. It is fun and I can relax".

4.1.4 Passing time. Passing time is related to use microblog to fill up free time (Althaus and Tewksbury, 2000). Microblog can help users passing time when they are bored or free, because users can find interesting things from microblog, for example, knowing what is happening on their contacts, playing games with others, watching interested videos and listening music. Of all, 12 (66.67 per cent) interviewees used microblog for passing time.

Some responses from interviewees were: "I read posts from microblog when waiting for bus"; "I log in microblog when class is boring"; "I use microblog when I can't sleep during night".

4.1.5 Information sharing. Information sharing is related to using microblog to share information with others. Through publishing posts to document their activities or feelings (e.g. what they are doing, what their feelings are) or making comments to others' posts, users can conveniently and freely share any types of information, such as useful

information, hotspots and interesting things. Of all, ten (55.56 per cent) interviewees used microblog for sharing information.

Some responses were: “I would like to share my ideas through posts or comments”; “I like to write down what I am thinking on things that I see or experience. Microblog provides various forms for me to do so, such as words, pictures, music or videos”; “When I read some interesting posts, I will share them with others”; “Through sharing, I could make advertisement for myself”; “I like making comments to others’ posts I am interested in. It is a good place to express whatever you want to”.

4.1.6 Social networking. Social networking refers to using microblog to be connected with others. Microblog creates an opportunity for networking and provides an online social platform for users to connect with friends and follow others (e.g. famous people) (Liu *et al.*, 2015). Of all, eight (44.44 per cent) interviewees reported using microblog for social networking.

Interviewee P mentioned that: “I think microblog is a good social networking tool. It not only makes us keep in touch with old friends, also give us opportunities to know others in the world”.

Interviewee E also said that: “I use microblog to maintain my social networks through sharing, commenting, or playing together with my online friends” (Table III).

4.2 Motivations to use WeChat

With respect to using WeChat, five motivations were identified as follows.

4.2.1 Private social networking. Private social networking pays more attention to users’ privacy. For WeChat users, they can share information with specific ones; they can establish their social networking with specific others. Of all, 16 (88.89 per cent) interviewees mentioned this type of motivation.

Some responses were: “Compared to microblog, WeChat is more private. Only my friends can read my posts”; “(WeChat) is a *private social networking platform*, not an

Motivations	Frequency	(%)	Keywords
Information seeking	15	83.33	Seek information on what happened; seeking information about studying aboard
Social interaction	13	72.22	Quickly know what happens on my friends and communicate with them; talk anything with them; pay attention to those who share similar interests with me
Entertainment	13	72.22	Much fun; enjoy it; playing games; relax
Passing time	12	66.67	Waiting for bus; class is boring; can’t sleep during night
Information sharing	10	55.56	Share my ideas; share them with others; write down what I am thinking; making comments; express whatever
Social networking	8	44.44	A good social networking tool; keep in touch with old friends; know others in the world; maintain my social networks

Note: Motivations for using microblog

Table III.
Summaries the motivations for using microblog

open one like microblog”; “I communicate with my real friends by WeChat, share ideas with them. So I can protect my privacy. I think this advantage is the most one that we choose to use WeChat”.

4.2.2 Convenient communication. WeChat provides texts and voices messages for user to communicate with others with no costs in a convenient way. Also, through group chatting, users can easily keep communications with more others. Of all, 14 (77.78 per cent) interviewees used WeChat due to convenient communication.

Interviewee F said that: WeChat is convenient for us to communicate with each other. There are texts and voices. I like the real-time speaking function. It is just like you are talking with somebody using the mobile phone, but without any costs.

Interviewee M also mentioned that: “It is indeed a convenient communication tool. It is mobile, so no matter where you are, you can use it to communicate with your friends. Expect for words, voices are more intuitive. Even your friends are not online when you talk with them, they can hear from you after logging in and replying to you quickly”.

4.2.3 High-quality information provided. High-quality information provided indicates that WeChat provide useful and interested information for users, rather than rubbish information. Of all, ten (55.56 per cent) interviewees mentioned the high-quality information provided by WeChat.

Some responses were: “There is not so much rubbish information. Only those I am interested in and focus on can be provided for me”; “It is not the same as using microblog. Microblog always pushes information that I do not like, such as advertisements. When I use WeChat, I only pay attention to those useful information. And other rubbish information will not come to me if I do not follow them”; “The information has high-quality, sometimes I think that I am reading a good prose. And there are no advertisements, less rubbish information”.

4.2.4 Information sharing. WeChat enable users to share information with their contacts through “share” button. Of all, nine (50 per cent) reported to use WeChat for information sharing.

Some responses were: “I use WeChat because I can share information with my friends: my current state, what I am doing at the moment, good articles that I ever read”; “When I read some interesting posts, I always share them with my friends. I just click the “share” button and it is done”.

4.2.5 Entertainment. By providing interesting posts, WeChat can bring entertainment for users. In addition, there are many amusement public WeChat accounts that users can choose to pay attention to, from which users can have fun. Of all, six (33.33 per cent) interviewees mentioned to use WeChat for entertainment.

Some responses were: “I have pay attention to one public account called ‘Eat, Drink, and Play in Guangzhou’. And it always provides me much interesting information that makes me feel funny”; “I like read all updated posts of my contacts before going to bed. Some of the posts are interesting, and make me laugh” (Table IV).

4.3 Gratifications to use microblog and WeChat

Based on the above findings and the three types of gratifications mentioned, we classify each motivation and identify the gratifications obtained from microblog and WeChat (Figure 1).

5. Discussion

This study examines and compares gratifications obtained from using microblog and WeChat through interviews. Results show that users could obtain three types of gratifications from using either microblog or WeChat: content gratification, social gratification and hedonic gratification. This is consistent with prior studies (Ku *et al.*, 2013a, 2013b; Lo and Leung, 2009). The largest similarity in users' motivations of using microblog and WeChat is that the three types of gratifications obtained are not different. As both microblog and WeChat are multiple-functional systems, the different features could satisfy different needs of users for different gratifications, which, in turn, drive their use of microblog and WeChat.

However, results also reveal that the strength and components of each gratification differ to varying degrees when using microblog and WeChat. The biggest difference between the motivations of using microblog and WeChat is that content gratification plays the most salient role in using microblog, while social gratification is the most important for WeChat usage. As for microblog, it offers a variety of information (e.g. life-related, work-related, entertainment-related) and they are user-generated, indicating that they can meet different users' information needs. Users can access to all the information without limitations in microblog. More importantly, microblog could

Motivations	Frequency	(%)	Keywords
Private social networking	16	88.89	More private; a private social networking platform
Convenient communication	14	77.78	Convenient; the real-time speaking function; a convenient communication tool; mobile
High-quality information provided	10	55.56	Not so much rubbish information; useful information; high-quality; no advertisements
Information sharing	9	50	Share information; share them with my friends; click the "share" button
Entertainment	6	33.33	Feel funny; interesting; laugh

Note: Motivations for using WeChat

Table IV.
Summaries the motivations for using WeChat

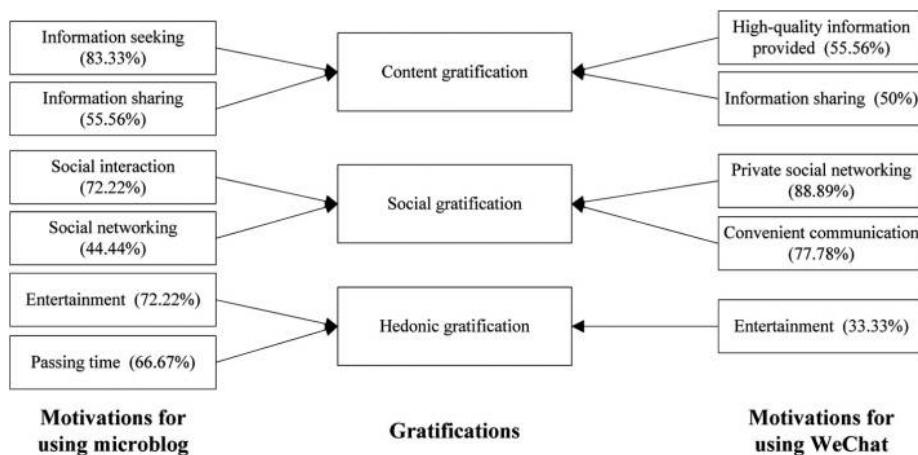


Figure 1.
Gratifications obtained from using microblog and WeChat

support two modes of information seeking: passive monitoring of events (through following RSS feeds of a selected group of users) and active seeking of practically effective information (by posting messages and requests to individual users or a network of users) (Savolainen, 1995; Zhang, 2012). Also, through comment and transmitting, it is easy to share any information. With respect to WeChat, one of the core characteristics of WeChat lies in private social networking, which is also the reason explaining why many users initially adopt it (Kantar, 2015). WeChat could well protect users' privacy, as WeChat "has built privacy measures that allow users to control who joins their friends list, views their information and manages how others can find them online" (Nay, 2013). Also, for higher security and control, users "have the option to activate two-way authentication to initiate a chat, opt in and out of location-based services (LBS) functions at any time and block out undesirable contacts" (Nay, 2013). In addition, WeChat realizes convenient communication through many features, such as Chat, Group and Shake. For example, except for text messaging, WeChat also provides hold-to-talk voice messaging, broadcast (one-to-many) messaging and videos as ways for communication (Wikipedia, 2015). And the WeChat Group enables communication among many users; anyone can easily establish a group so as to communicate with others who share the same interests. The feature of "Shake" makes users easily add friends who use the same feature at the same time.

Other differences between the motivations of using microblog and WeChat are as following:

- Hedonic gratification is different for microblog and WeChat. WeChat users pay the least attention on hedonic gratification, and it includes only entertainment. Although WeChat provides features for entertainment (e.g. online games), it seems that users pay more attention on its social features. And microblog can help passing time and bring entertainment for users, which develop hedonic gratification. The features of microblog, such as Look Around, Hot Topics and Issue A Topic, enable users to acquire information from different sources, which create fun, amusement.
- WeChat satisfies users' content gratification through high-quality information provided. WeChat users can decide what kind of information to focus on by personalization settings, and rubbish information will not recommended to them, which guarantees the quality of information. Also, users will not receive advisement messages from the unknown.

6. Implications and limitations

From a theoretical perspective, this study expands the research scope on gratifications of social media with reference to a comparison. This research conducted a comparison study of gratifications obtained from using microblog and WeChat and highlighted the importance of content gratification for using microblog as well as social gratification for using WeChat. As noted earlier, extant studies on gratifications of social media were mainly focused on one social media and fewer studies have examined the differences of gratifications obtained from two social media. Second, this research advances our understanding of gratifications by identifying their components and reveals the differences of the same gratifications obtained from using microblog and WeChat. Though previous studies showed the same gratifications, they do not clearly tell us their components and, thus, cannot show the differences. This study tries to fill this research gap.

From a managerial perspective, the findings clarify the general and niche gratifications for using microblog and WeChat, indicating that developers of different social media should not only design the necessary features to fulfill the general gratifications, but also pay attention on the unique features to meet the niche gratifications. For example, social gratification is the most important factor that drives users to adopt WeChat. And private social networking is the specific motivation. So WeChat service provider should pay more attention on how to create a private atmosphere for users. Second, designers should focus on the different roles of functions for different social media. The artifact of social media affects users' motivations in some extent. As many social media share the similar functions, how to attract users and promote their satisfaction, thus, fostering their continuance usage is a big issue for service providers. For example, WeChat successfully integrates the functions of social networking and instant communication and made a huge success worldwide.

Although this study has revealed interesting and useful findings on gratifications of different social media, there are a few limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and the respondents were mainly university students from China. Consequently, caution should be exercised when generalizing the research findings of this study to other demographic groups. Future studies should consider more samples by including participants of various groups, such as working staff and users in other countries. Second, the study adopts qualitative method for exploring gratifications obtained from using microblog and WeChat. Further research should also conduct a quantitative study on identifying the gratifications. Third, this study explores the U & G approach as the theoretical background. Further research could consider a comparison of the U & G approach with the dominant IS adoption theories in explaining the adoption of microblog and WeChat.

Note

1. In this section, the cited language from respondents is translated by authors, as the interviews were done in Chinese.

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About the authors

Chunmei Gan is an Assistant Professor at School of Information Management, Sun Yat-sen University. She has conducted research on user adoption and post adoption behavior in the field of social media and mobile services. She has so far co-authored one book (in Chinese) and has published in *Industrial Management & Data Systems*, *Information Development*, *International Journal of Innovation Management*, *Journal of Library Science in China*, *Journal of the China Society for Scientific and Technical Information* and several other top Chinese journals in field of information science. Her papers have also been presented in international conferences, such as ECKM, PACIS and ISPIM. Chunmei Gan is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: chunmei_gan@163.com

Weijun Wang is a Professor at School of Information Management, Central China Normal University. His research interests are information resources management, information services and social media. His research has been published in journals, such as *Journal of Internet Technology*, *Information-An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, *Journal of Library Science in China*, *Journal of the China Society for Scientific and Technical Information among others*. His papers have also been presented in international conferences, such as PACIS.

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