

# Value Analysis of Social Media from the Perspective of Structural Functionalism: A Case study of the Use of Wechat in Chinese Society

Jiayi Sha

Sun Yat-sen University School of Law, Guangzhou 510006, China.

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**Abstract:** Online social communication has become a common behavior of netizens in contemporary Chinese society. Social media is closely related to our life and has gradually built a media-oriented social life state for us. Based on Parsons and Merton's theory of structural functionalism, social media represented by wechat have different effects on the economy, politics, social integration, cultural maintenance and other systems of society, such as positive function, negative function, explicit function and latent function.

**Keywords:** Structural Functionalism; Social Media; Value; Wechat

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## Introduction

According to the 47th Statistical Report on the Development of the Internet in China, as of December 2020, the number of instant messaging users in China reached 981 million, accounting for 99.2% of the total Internet users, and online social intercourse become a common behavior of netizens in contemporary China. Since Tencent launched the wechat application to serve mobile intelligent terminal device users, by February 2019, the installed penetration rate of wechat has reached 85.8%, and the monthly active users have reached 1 billion.<sup>[1]</sup> Wechat is second to none in the domestic mobile social networking industry, and it is one of the most representative instant messaging platforms.

Merowitz mentioned in *Lost Territory* that "the most fundamental thing about electronic media is that it influences us not by its content, but by changing the scene of social life." According to the 2020 White Paper on China's "Social Retail", "Chinese consumers spend an average of nearly four hours a day on their mobile phones, of which more than 2.3 hours are spent on social media, with an average of more than 750 million users reading posts on moments every day." With the development of the Times, the social media represented by wechat keeping updating and iterating, and its functions changing with each passing day. It not only brings convenience to our life in the aspects of information acquisition, life service, culture and entertainment, but also exposes many problems, which are worth our deep thinking.

## 1. Structural functionalism perspective

According to the structural functionalists of Parsons school, the social system we live in needs to meet four functional conditions to ensure its own maintenance and survival, namely, adaptation, goalattainment, integration, and latent protective function (laten-cy). In the real society, the subsystems of these four functions evolve into the trusteeship system of economic, political, social community and cultural model. When a structure in a social system or subsystem changes, the nature or magnitude of the system's functions will also change.<sup>[2]</sup> Based on the view of structural functionalism, the use of wechat and other new media also has different effects on social systems such as economy, politics, social integration and cultural maintenance, such as positive function, negative function, explicit function and latent function.

## **2. Analysis of the functional impact of wechat on various social systems**

### **2.1 Economic system: convenience and risk coexist**

The positive function of wechat to the economic system is mainly reflected in wechat payment, wechat mall and other aspects. Nowadays, it is very common for us to carry only a mobile phone when we go out. Getting groceries, shopping, eating, watching movies..... Even beggars have started using wechat's code-scanning function. It can be said that the emergence of wechat Pay has greatly improved the transaction efficiency. Wechat Mall has attracted many businesses by its low operating cost, a wide range of audience and more accurate advertising, enriches trading channels, and helps the economic development of our country.

Wechat's counter-function to the economic system is worrying. Due to the unfairness of information in the process of wechat communication and the lack of effective credit evaluation mechanism in our society, it is difficult to regulate wechat trading, and illegal trade, fraud and other behaviors occur from time to time. At the same time, the widespread use of two-dimensional code to phishing websites to take advantage of the opportunity to increase the netizen's information security leakage risk.

The explicit functions of wechat to the economic system include improving transaction efficiency, enriching transaction channels, reducing business operation costs and so on, while the latent functions of wechat to the economic system involve improving the risk of petty crimes and fund reserve and so on.

### **2.2 Political system: efficiency and credibility go hand in hand**

The positive functions of wechat for political system are reflected in the operation of wechat for government affairs and the use of wechat groups for grassroots governance. The emergence of wechat in government affairs not only conforms to the people's demands for openness in government affairs, but also helps the people to understand the government's related work. Moreover, the unimpeded dialogue channels also promote the government to understand the people's feelings and improve the democratic and scientific decision-making of government departments. In the process of grassroots governance, the use of wechat groups has built a new window for grassroots government agencies to serve the people, shorten the distance with the people through real-time interaction, improve the efficiency, and effectively promote grassroots governance.

The negative function of wechat to the political system includes the problem that some government affairs platforms cannot be implemented in time after getting feedback from netizens. The real interaction between the government and the people has a long way to go. At the same time, power and responsibility are not clear and other problems are common, which to some extent causes the low efficiency of administration.

The latent function of wechat to the political system is reflected in that due to the strong privacy and fast transmission speed of wechat communication, the dissemination of some false information about government departments is easy to produce fission transmission effect, causing adverse social influence and reducing the credibility of the government.

### **2.3 Social integration system: loneliness or gregariousness?**

The positive function of wechat to the social system is mainly reflected in its shaping of interpersonal communication mode. The appearance of "take a beat", "quote", "like" and other functions enriches the fun of interactive experience. Functions such as "list grouping" and "star marking at the top" improve the freedom of interpersonal communication and give users control over the rhythm of interpersonal communication. While "wechat sports ranking" and "moments comments" alleviate the tension of real communication through delayed social interaction, which is conducive to the consolidation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.

The reverse function of wechat to the social system is shown in that some users over-rely on wechat for social communication, and the social phenomenon of "never leaving the phone without the hand" causes "wechat autism" to a certain extent. According to the study, "53 percent of people feel restless when they are off the Internet, and of these restless users, 40 percent feel lonely when they are off the Internet."<sup>[3]</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned explicit functions, wechat's latent functions are manifested in its value in self-packaging.

In his book *Human Nature and Social Order*, Charles, an American sociologist, put forward that "the evaluation and attitude of others to oneself is a mirror reflecting the self, through which individuals know and grasp themselves."<sup>[4]</sup> The functions of "profile setting" and "moments" in wechat provide people with the possibility of self-impression management, which makes some users addicted to the virtual mirror space constructed by themselves, resulting in the difference of online and offline personality characteristics, which leads to the confusion and emptiness of users themselves.

## 2.4 Cultural maintenance system: individuation publicity

The positive function of wechat to culture maintenance system is specifically expressed as mobile learning function. By sending voice messages and video calls, we can achieve quick and convenient instant interaction, break regional limitations and realize cultural communication. The development of wechat small program and the subscription push of public account better meet the personalized needs of users and further promote the sharing of resources. The function of supervision can also be better realized through the learning punch in the moments of friends, which is conducive to the long-term persistence of learning activities.

The counter-function of wechat to the cultural maintenance system is reflected in the deepening of the intergenerational conflict, which can be attributed to two reasons. First, because of the users of wechat tend to be younger, the social and cultural environment is also affected to a certain extent. In the process of using wechat to communicate, the elderly tend to understand the literal meaning, while the young are not limited to the literal meaning, resulting in the difference between symbol coding and decoding results. Secondly, under the influence of algorithmic recommendation mechanism, the personalized communication in the process of using wechat is more and more obvious, and the information sharing interaction between the elderly and the young is gradually reduced, resulting in the deepening of the intergenerational conflict.

In addition to the above obvious functions, due to the privacy of wechat communication, its potential function for cultural maintenance system is the role of information cocoon. Through functions such as "friend permission setting", users tend to read and obtain information that meets their individual needs, which to a certain extent leads to the information cocoon effect.

## 3. Conclusion

As a new social media that has been widely used, wechat has been deeply integrated into people's lives. While enjoying great convenience provided by wechat and other network media, we should also pay attention to the double-edged sword role of wechat in various social systems. How to make use of strengths and circumvent weaknesses, and how to avoid risks, clarify rights and responsibilities, stay away from loneliness, and bridge the gap between generations while improving efficiency, promoting public trust, increasing communication, and publicizing personality need to be continuously and deeply discussed. I believe that rational thinking and vigorous action will make us clear in the confusion, clear in the chaos, and embrace a warmer and richer tomorrow.

About the author: Sha Jiayi (2003 -), female, born in Binzhou, Shandong Province, mainly engaged in legal culture research.

**Supported by:** Shandong Provincial Key Project of Art Science "Research on Red Memory and Its Visual Presentation in Huanghekou Culture" (L2021Z07070445)

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