



香港城市大學
City University of Hong Kong

專業 創新 胸懷全球
Professional · Creative
For The World

CityU Scholars

A symbolic interactionism perspective of using social media for personal and business communication

Chen, Renee Rui; Davison, Robert M.; Ou, Carol Xiaojuan

Published in:

International Journal of Information Management

Published: 01/04/2020

Document Version:

Post-print, also known as Accepted Author Manuscript, Peer-reviewed or Author Final version

License:

CC BY-NC-ND

Publication record in CityU Scholars:

[Go to record](#)

Published version (DOI):

[10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2019.10.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2019.10.007)

Publication details:

Chen, R. R., Davison, R. M., & Ou, C. X. (2020). A symbolic interactionism perspective of using social media for personal and business communication. *International Journal of Information Management*, 51, Article 102022. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2019.10.007>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on CityU Scholars is the Post-print version (also known as Accepted Author Manuscript, Peer-reviewed or Author Final version), it may differ from the Final Published version. When citing, ensure that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination and other details.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the CityU Scholars portal is retained by the author(s) and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights. Users may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.

Publisher permission

Permission for previously published items are in accordance with publisher's copyright policies sourced from the SHERPA RoMEO database. Links to full text versions (either Published or Post-print) are only available if corresponding publishers allow open access.

Take down policy

Contact lbscholars@cityu.edu.hk if you believe that this document breaches copyright and provide us with details. We will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

© 2019. This manuscript version is made available under the CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

A Symbolic Interactionism Perspective of Using Social Media for Personal and Business Communication

1. Introduction

Social media applications, which were originally designed for personal communication, have now gained unprecedented popularity among organizations. Due to the advantages associated with supporting interactive and immediate communications, social media has been touted as a magic bullet that can help companies to attract new customers (Trusov et al. 2009), increase customer brand awareness (Goh et al. 2015, Lien and Cao 2014), grow customers' brand engagement (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013), build close relationships with customers and thus eventually increase customer loyalty (Yadav and Pavlou 2014). Managers diligently engage on different social media platforms, e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Weibo and WeChat, for business purposes. According to McKinsey, in 2013 more than 70% of US companies engaged in social media marketing and nearly a third of the Interbrand 100 had set up Twitter accounts. In China, based on recent reports from Tencent, by the end of 2016 there were more than 10 million official WeChat accounts, with millions of companies engaging in social media marketing through WeChat.

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). A key issue in current social media research is to understand how effectively organizations can interact with customers via social media (Yadav and Pavlou, 2014). In order to address this issue, it is necessary to shift the focus of research from the company side to the customer side. It is unknown whether customers would like to be engaged in business communication with companies through the same technology they use for personal communication. Therefore, companies should not necessarily jump into the conclusion that they can effectively engage with customers through social media channels for the purpose of business communication.

Previous studies have provided theoretical explanations to the unsatisfied results of social media in business communication. However, we found that the literature on social media for personal communication solely depends on either technology-related (e.g., Bartelt and Dennis 2014) or social-related factors (e.g., Dolan et al. 2016) in predicting the general use of technology. Among the social media research for business communication, even though an increasing volume of research has confirmed the unsatisfied results of social media (Liu et al. 2018; Miller and Tucker 2013), there is no insufficient theoretical explanations of why this is the case. Therefore, in this paper, we address the following question: *(1) how does a social medium elicit symbolic meanings among users in personal*

and business communication contexts?, and (2) how does the symbolic meaning of a social medium reflect in the patterns of medium use in these two contexts? In order to answer this question, we draw upon symbolic interactionism (Aakhus et al. 2014; Stryker and Statham 1985; Blumer 1969; Mead 1934). It suggests that how individuals respond towards an object can be explained by their interpreted symbolic meanings towards it under a particular social context. Therefore, a technology may represent radically different meanings to 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 meaning (Miranda and Saunders 2003), which provides a basis for subsequent use patterns. Through this theoretical lens, we compare the symbolic meanings of a social medium and the consequent impacts on use patterns in both personal and business communication contexts. Engaging in an in-depth investigation of a hotel's use of a social medium, we contribute to literature by highlighting the importance of understanding how users construct symbolic meanings associated with a technology and how these constructed meanings influence use patterns across two different communication contexts.

Theoretically, we expect our contribution to be threefold. First, we contribute to research on symbolic interactionism which highlights the intertwined relationships between symbolic meanings of objects and people's responses to the objects. We identify the specific cues elicited symbolic meanings of social media under a particular communication context, and the generated usage patterns. Secondly, we contribute to current IS research with respect to the symbolic meaning of technology by exploring how a technology represents different meanings to a user group in different communication contexts. Second, we clearly define the concept of symbolic meaning of a technology and differentiate it from other similar and overlapping concepts in the literature. Thirdly, we identify the relationship between user interpretations of the symbolic meanings of a medium and the use patterns associated with this medium. Finally, we extend prior work on social media for both personal and business communication. By adopting the perspective of symbolic interactionism, we found that some media may not be appropriate for companies to build relationships with customers due to the specific meaning that the technology symbolizes under the business communication context. Practically, we suggest that a learning organization should listen to customers' opinions with respect to its use of social media for business communication.

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

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media for Personal and Business Communication

Social media, a type of communication media created since the 1990s¹, designed for people's exchange and sharing of content via virtual networks and communities, has "fundamentally changed the way we communicate, collaborate, consume and create" (Aral et al. 2013, p.3). It also represents one of the most transformative impacts of information technology on business, that is, the way business sells and communicates with customers. To generate a comprehensive view of the impacts of social media in society, we review prior research by classifying their research contexts into two broad groups: personal communication between individuals (Table A1 in Appendix A), and business communication between organizations and customers (Table A2 in Appendix A).

We started with the review of the literature on personal communication. First, the perspective of technological-determinism² has been primarily adopted in this research area, that is, exploring the role of technology-related factors, e.g., technical features (e.g., Bartelt and Dennis 2014; Cvijikj and Michahelles 2013) and message characteristics (e.g., Dolan et al. 2016; Galluch et al. 2015). This stream of research focuses on "the inherent features of a technology independent from its use and context in which the technology is used" (Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. 2014 p.813). It assumes that the design of social media inevitably leads to certain use behaviors, which creates the foundation where social values are built (Aral et al. 2013). Research questions, including 1) how the technical factors affect users' behaviors and interactions with others?; 2) how values are derived from the implemented social media with specific technical features?; and 3) how do users interact with the technical features? are frequently asked. Secondly, either person-related factors (e.g., personal needs and traits), or social relationship-related factors (e.g., relationship strength and network characteristics), are often investigated as the sole antecedents in predicting the impact of social media, with fewer joint effects where both technology-related and social-related factors are explored. Thirdly, the main predicted outcomes are behavioral intention, use behavior, and performance derived from use, such as decision quality, and work performance (both negative and positive). However, it is hard to adequately understand the impacts of social media by only focusing on the general "use" (Burton-Jones and Straub 2006; Stein et al. 2015). Therefore, it is necessary to shift the focus of general media use to users' appropriation of media (Curtis et al. 2017), which is referred to as "use patterns" in this study.

With respect to the literature on business communication, earlier research largely holds a positive view on the impact of social media on business communication (e.g. Stephens and Rains 2011; Trusov et al. 2009). However, recent research has increasingly found that those impacts are not as positive as they

¹ According to Wikipedia, the first recognizable social media site was Six Degrees, created in 1997. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_social_media

² Technological-determinism widely focuses on the inherent features of a technology independent from its use context (Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. 2014). From this perspective, some inherent features of a technology consistently contribute to certain IT use patterns and downstream performance impacts, either positive or negative outcomes across different individuals or contexts (Markus and Silver 2008). The underlying assumption is that individuals use technology in exactly the way it is designed to be used.

are supposed to be. For instance, John et al. (2017) found that compared to offline endorsement, online endorsement on social media has less impact on consumers' positive brand attitude and purchasing behaviors. When seeing a friend has 'liked' a company's page on Facebook, consumers may be more reluctant to buy from the company, because endorsement on Facebook is considered as more meaningless and unreliable. Similarly, Stephen and Galak (2012) found that social media is effective in bringing repeated customers and traditional media is still powerful in terms of attracting new customers. In other words, customers who have preexisting fondness towards a brand are more likely to buy when a brand is exposed on social media. However, it is hard to persuade a new customer through such forms of media exposure. Even though research has demonstrated the ineffectiveness of social media in business communication, inadequate explanations are provided. Some researchers have tried to provide initial attempts for the unsatisfied results of social media marketing (e.g., Richey and Ravishankar, 2019; Liu et al. 2018; Miller and Tucker 2013), but it is still unclear what leads to such unsatisfied results.

In conclusion, we found that the literature on social media for personal communication solely depends on either technology-related or social-related factors in predicting the general use of technology. Among the social media research for business communication, even though an increasing volume of research has confirmed the unsatisfied results of social media, there is an insufficient theoretical explanations of why this is the case. Therefore, in this study, we adopt the perspective of symbolic interactionism. By exploring technology symbolism, we attempt to understand the meaning a social medium symbolizes under both personal and business communication contexts.

2.2 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism originates from social psychology (e.g., Aakhus et al. 2014; Blumer 1969). It focuses on the process by which individuals understand their world. According to Mead's (1934) seminal research, the underlying assumption of symbolic interactionism is that people interpret social situations, rather than simply reacting to the situations. Therefore, their stimulated response is a function of the interpreted meaning attached to such situations. Symbol and action are highlighted as two key terms in symbolic interactionism. Here *a symbol* is taken as the stimulus with a learned and represented meaning in the situations and *action* refers to doing and responding (Aakhus et al. 2014). The process whereby the interpreted meaning of a symbol shapes and influences an individual's responses and behaviours is termed as *enactment* (Gopal and Prasad 2000). For example, the meanings attached to social media (symbol) may exert a considerable influence on how people perceive the media and thereby influence the way they use the media (action). It is noted that enactment is a dynamic and iterative process (Leonardi 2013). Thus, the attached meanings and individual responses to that meaning are inextricably intertwined during social interactions, not isolated from each other.

Symbolic interactionism 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, sometimes contradictory, images and meanings for people from various backgrounds or in various contexts (Turner 2006). 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). Under different social contexts, people are involved in different roles, with different expectations towards social interactions based on the specific roles they play (Rajao and Marcolino 2016). A particular word, such as ‘technology’, may have different connotations for people who play different roles and in different situations; therefore it needs to be understood as such. For example, for an enterprise system, a department head assumes his or her role as “a manager” and thus may understand the system as a tool in terms of managing people and processes, while an employee thinks of him or herself as the one “being controlled”, so creating an impression about being controlled by using the system (Stein et al. 2015). Therefore, meaning derives from dynamic and changeable individual roles in social contexts, and may not be necessarily stable or constant.

Symbolic interactionism is not a uniform and static theoretical approach (Aakhus et al. 2014), and has been introduced to various fields of research, including organizational behaviour (Dionysiou and Tsoukas 2012), human resource management (Zott and Huy 2007), and information systems (Miranda and Saunders 2003; Saunders and Jones 1990; Trevino et al. 1987). Trevino et al. (1987) take a more “micro view” (DeSanctis and Poole 1994, p.125), termed as structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker and Statham 1985), to examine the interpersonal interactions that occurs via new media. This view deviates from the social constructive stance in traditional symbolic interactionism (e.g., Mead 1934). It argues that although symbols and actions are developed during social interactions, they can be structured and patterned, which may be determined and predictable. For example, the inherent differences of face-to-face talk and telecommunication results in different symbolic meanings, which leads to different media choice behaviors. Considering the complex development of symbolic interactionism (Gopal and Prasad 2000; Aakhus et al. 2014), this study doesn’t intend to compare and contrast different research streams. Instead, the following section will elaborate on the broader relevance of symbolic interactionism perspective in IS studies, and it provides a theoretical foundation for this research.

2.3 The 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, while the

symbolic meaning represents subjective or interpreted characteristics of a technology. Previous research mainly focused on exploring the intrinsic meaning of technology (Jung and Lyytinen 2014; Tan et al. 2014; Markus and Silver 2008), which is also known as technological determinism.

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 (Markus and Silver 2008). As suggested by Adaptive Structuration Theory (DeSanctis and Poole 1994), users adaptively structure the technology to fit their needs. Users' perceptions and interpretations towards a technology may completely deviate from the way designers build the system, because "users are likely to capture only limited aspects" of the system (DeSanctis and Poole 1994, p.126).

The symbolic view of technology shifts the focus to an interpretation-based phenomenon describing how the technology is constructed and understood by users in different social settings. This perspective considers technology as a subjective and symbolic object. Symbolic objects comprise shared, abstract, and context-sensitive beliefs. Research in this realm shows that technology has symbolic meaning, which is typically complex and goes beyond the simply designed and observational features. Attempts have been made to investigate the symbolic meaning of technologies. However, multiple issues have been identified in response to these studies and the more general consideration of symbolic meaning in IS research. These issues include (1) a confusion about different symbolic meaning-related concepts; (2) over-reliance on understanding how symbolic meaning influences general use behaviors, while the impact of symbolic meanings on detailed use patterns less explored; (3) weak understanding towards how the constructed meanings of a technology differ across contexts.

As summarized in Table 1, this stream of research has understood the symbolic meaning of media in three ways: (1) the ability or property of technology to convey symbolic meaning; (2) the interpretations and perceptions of technology among a specific group of users; (3) a relational concept between the technology property and interpreted meanings.

First, symbolic meaning has been understood as a type of ability or property of technology. For example, the concept of "*technology spirit*" was coined by DeSanctis and Poole (1994). Spirit captures "the general intent with regard to values and goals of technologies underlying a given set of functional features" (ibid., p.126). In the current study, spirit, values and goals are categorized as a type of technical feature that may exist either dependent on or independent of users' interpretations. Secondly, symbolic meaning has been investigated as the interpretation or perceptions of technology among users. For instance, the term *technology frame* represents individuals' interpretations of a technology, which explains "the underlying assumptions, expectations, and knowledge that people have about technology" (Orlikowski and Gash 1994, p.174). Accordingly, frames are schema about how individuals interpret the meaning of a situation, and thus are constructed individually based on personal experiences and knowledge. Unlike the emphasis on individual level, the term "*symbolic meaning of technologies*" is

used to characterize the social meaning of technology (Fulk 1993). Symbolic meaning derives from interactive interpretations and is shared by groups of people, rather than simply developing from the cognition of an individual. Thirdly, in order to bridge IT features and a specified group of users' interpretations, Markus and Silver (2008) argued that there is "something" in IT artifacts contributing to users' interpretations of a technology's goal and values. The concept of *symbolic expressions*, defined as "the communicative possibilities of a technical object for a specific user group" (p.623), is then proposed by Markus and Silver (2008). It is noted that symbolic expressions refer to neither technical features nor human interpretations, but a bridge to connect those two parts.

Table 1. Studies on Symbolic View of Communication Technologies				
Study	Key Terms	Definitions	Descriptions (e.g., similarities and differences)	Methodology and Context
Trevino et al. (1987)	Media symbolism	Media can be considered as a symbol and carrier of meaning.	It is <i>shared meanings among organization' members</i> provided by a medium beyond the obvious content of the message.	An interpretative study in organization context
Fulk (1993)	Meaning of communication technology	The rich meanings created by users through their choice of specific symbolic features of a technology.	It is <i>shared meanings</i> of communication technologies among group members.	A survey in organization context
DeSanctis and Poole (1994)	Technological spirit	The general intent with regard to values and goals of technologies underlying a given set of functional features.	It is <i>a property of the technology</i> as it is presented to user. It is neither the designers' intentions nor users' perceptions or interpretations. It can be analysed based on 1) design metaphor underlying the system; 2) features; 3) the nature of the user interface; 3) training materials and guidance; 4) other training or help provided.	A theoretical study
Orlikowski and Gash. (1994)	Technology Frame	Individuals' interpretations of a technology, which explain the underlying assumptions, expectations, and knowledge that people have about the technology.	It is the local understanding of specific users in a given setting. Three dimensions: <i>nature of technology; technology strategy (goal); technology in use (value)</i>	A case study in organization context
Markus and Silver.(2008)	Symbolic Expressions	The communicative possibilities of technical objects for a specified user group.	A relational concept bridging IT features and a specified group of users' interpretations. It is noted that symbolic expressions are neither technical features nor human interpretations, but a bridge to connect those two parts.	
Tan et al. (2014)	Symbolic meaning or communication technology	A set of meanings about the nature and purpose of technologies, which are consistent across social settings.	It is the perceptions of a cohort of people.	Field experiments in commercial communication contexts in two counties
Stein et al. (2015)	IT symbolism	The characteristics of IT associated with broader ideas and convey various connations.	It is the characteristics of a technology.	A case study in organization context

With so many concepts (e.g., spirit, symbolic expressions, technology frame, symbolic meaning), each having similar or overlapping definitions, it is not surprising that confusions arise. To contribute to the creation of a consistent body of knowledge on symbolic meaning in IS, this study defines *symbolic meaning of a technology* as follows: (1) it is an interpreted meaning of a technology, which is characterized in terms of *goals* (what is the technology used to do) and *values* (what are the criteria and standards in terms of using the technology); (2) it is socially constructed by a specific group of users, and thus must be understood dependent on the social context; (3) it is as or more important as the innate technical features and capabilities; (4) as a technology may include many functions and users may employ different functions for different purposes across contexts, the symbolic meaning of a technology may be contested and may not be consistent among different users.

In addition to the diversified definitions of symbolic meaning in the literature, the relationship between symbolic meaning and specific actions is the second issue worthy of investigation. Even though researchers realize the important impact of symbolic meaning on use behaviors, most researchers choose to focus on only general use behaviors, such as media choice (e.g., Treem et al. 2015) and responses to messages (Liu et al. 2018; Tan et al. 2014). In this study, we examine the impact of symbolic meaning of social media on media use, but most importantly, we investigate the impact of symbolic meaning on divergent use patterns.

The third issue points to a lack of exploration on how the constructed meaning of a technology differs through different contexts. It is important to note that the same technology used in different environments may result in different symbolic meanings, due to different designed functions, and user groups. Research has previously made considerable efforts to understand the general meaning of a technology regardless of the context in which it is used. For example, it is generally agreed that email is a formal technology and should be used for instrumental communication, while instant messenger is informal and should be used for more intimate and frequent communications (Jung et al. 2014; O’Leary et al. 2014; Tan et al. 2014). However, less attention has been paid to whether these meanings change across contexts as they are socially constructed.

3. Research Contexts and Methods

3.1 Research Contexts

This research is framed as an exploratory case study (Walsham 2006) as we didn’t have pre-conceived ideas about what we might find, beyond those indicated in the literature review (Davison et al. 2018). Specifically, we aimed to uncover the symbolic meaning of social media interpreted by individuals in both business and personal communication contexts. Furthermore, we sought to explore how individual users act and respond to messages received from social media, considering the symbolic meaning of the media.

We looked for a context where it is necessary for an organization to engage in business communications with customers when providing services or goods. In addition, the organization should have adopted social media for business communication for some time and have a considerable number of followers. Thirdly, we needed unrestricted access to various stakeholders, e.g., followers of the organization on social media, managers of the organization, employees operating the social media for business communication in the organization. In other words, support and collaboration from the organization is especially important in this study. These criteria led us to identify a luxury hotel (which we pseudonymise as Moon Struck) located in Guangzhou, China, Moon Struck, which is involved in using WeChat for business communication with more than 10,000 followers.

WeChat, the most popular mobile social media application in China, had over 1 billion monthly active users by 2018 (WeChat Data Report 2018). Although WeChat is primarily designed as an instant messaging application for personal communication, it also functions as a business platform for transactions-related activities, such as advertising, selling, and customer service. There are two types of WeChat account: personal and official. A personal account enables individual communication (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many among individuals). An official account allows for communication between a company and its followers (one company to many followers). Supportive functions, such as online shopping and e-wallet, could be integrated in WeChat, which facilitate business communications and transactions³. It is noted that the functions and design of personal accounts is fixed, while those of official accounts could be modified by account holders.

Motivated by the popularity of using social media for business communication, Moon Struck opened its WeChat official account to serve customers in China in early 2014. The official account aimed at building close relationships with followers, and then converting large numbers of followers into customers who could contribute to the hotel's revenue stream. The official WeChat account was also connected to the hotel's room booking website and its WeChat shop. However, although the hotel had invested in the official account for more than one year, it experienced difficulties in realizing its ambition. The page view of WeChat messages was low, with 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 benefited from increased revenue, whether of rooms being occupied or other hotel facilities (restaurants, spa, etc.) being utilized. Indeed, it is fair to say that Moon Struck neither knew anything about the followers themselves, nor even whether the followers wanted to use WeChat as a business

³ The description of WeChat is based on the current version at the time of data collection, that is WeChat 6.2. The latest version, WeChat 6.6.1, provides more complex and advanced functions on shopping, news subscription, and so on.

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 uses a popular social media for business communication with a large number of followers on the media, 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

We collected data from followers of Moon Struck's WeChat official account. Firstly, we contacted the regional manager and residential manager of the hotel to obtain access to its official account and the staff who operated the account. Secondly, we needed access to followers whom we could identify and later contact for interviews. Unfortunately, due to the design of the WeChat official account to protect followers' privacy, Moon Struck didn't have any information of followers at the individual level, except their profile pictures, WeChat IDs, and WeChat names. To make matters worse, contact with individual followers was not allowed for an official account⁴. Therefore, we sent an online survey through Moon Struck's weekly e-journal on WeChat to solicit essential information from interested followers, including demographics, contacts, experience with the hotel, and experience with the hotel's WeChat account. Based on the results of the survey (Appendix B), we recruited representatives of followers from different age ranges and occupations, both loyal and those who had never been to Moon Struck, both experienced and new in terms of following the official account.

In total, six semi-structured interviews (interview protocol in Appendix B) were conducted with 13 interviewees. Followers were randomly divided into focus groups. Each focus-group interview lasted 50-70 minutes, with an average length of 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, and were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Two researchers conducted the interviews, one was responsible for asking questions and another one for taking notes. The data saturation (Yin 2009) was achieved with this group of 13 interviewees and therefore we did not continue inviting interviewees and collect more data.

In addition to these formal interviews, we also engaged in casual conversations with the followers before and after interviews. Furthermore, we had the opportunity to engage in conversations with employees of the hotel a variety of employees in different positions and departments. We have also collected background data from WeChat personal account and this hotel's WeChat official account so

⁴ In order to protect followers' privacy, WeChat didn't share any information of followers at individual level to the holders of official account. Contact with individual followers was also forbidden unless the conversation was initiated by the followers.

as to analyze technical features. These allowed interview data to be complemented with observations of Moon Struck’s use of WeChat for business communication unfolding in front of us.

3.3 Data Analyses

Following the steps of analysing qualitative data suggested by Stein et al. (2015), we described the process of data analysis in two parts. First, we discuss how data was coded, and how symbolic meaning and actions were aggregated. Then we consider the analysis in terms of developing relationships linking technical cues, social cues, symbolic meaning of social media, and use patterns (Figure 1). Our theoretical foundation was symbolic interactionism (Prasad 1993; Blumer 1969; Mead 1934) that assumes people act on the basis of meaning, which is developed and modified under social contexts.

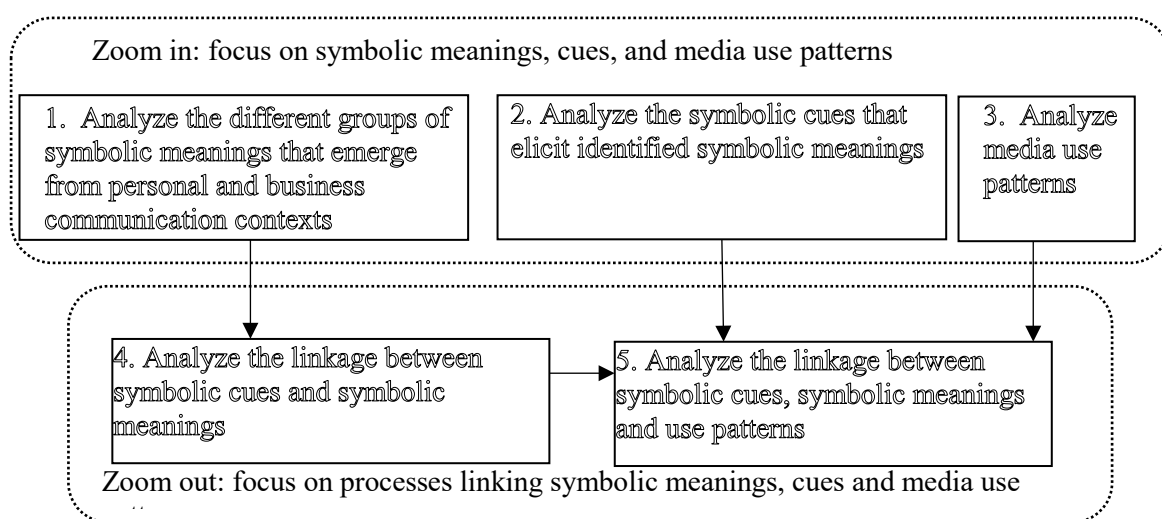


Figure 1. Overview of Data Analysis Steps following Stein et al. (2015)

Firstly, we zoomed into *symbolic meanings* in personal and business communication contexts, to examine which particular *symbolic cues* elicited these meanings, and to explore particular *media use patterns* that users enact. For the data coding, we followed the bottom-up process suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The coding process was inductive and interactive, following the process outlined by Young et al. (2012) with discussions between the authors about the naming of themes and classification of concepts. Firstly, the first author coded each transcript (a single uninterrupted interviewee response) to identify the tentative concepts into themes, which was checked by the second author and further validated by the third author. We then grouped them into sub-themes. Finally, we sought to identify the overarching themes that could link the separate sub-themes. We iterated through the coding scheme before reading a final version that all authors agreed on. In the complete version of concept map (an example of the final concept map is presented in Appendix C), we have identified the three overarching themes: symbolic meanings (step 1); cues embedded in the contexts that elicited symbolic meanings (step 2); the specific kind of use patterns individuals enacted based on the meanings (step 3).

We began our coding by identifying the presence of symbolic meanings in our data. We looked for how the interviewees described their understanding of WeChat. We compared and contrasted symbolic meanings emerging from our data in order to group them into two sub-themes, including *goals* and *values* (Markus and Silver 2008). In step 2, we analyzed the various reasons given for the specific type of symbolic meanings in descriptions of followers' past experiences. We categorized symbolic cues into two groups: technical cues (cues related to the technical features or functions in a specific context) and social cues (cues related to relationships among interlocutors in a specific context). After aggregating data across individuals, we found evidence for five distinct technical cues: *synchronicity*, *reciprocity*, *cues*, *reviewability* and *rehearsability*. A similar process was also applied to the analysis of use patterns in step 3.

Secondly, the focused investigation of specific types of symbolic meanings, cues and use patterns was followed by a consideration of how these themes are linked together. In order to do so, we zoomed out and investigated the linkage between various symbolic cues, symbolic meanings, and media use patterns (step 4 and 5). This allowed us to contribute to the theory.

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. The linkages between symbolic cues, symbolic meaning, and use patterns are presented in propositions in the section of discussions.

4. Findings

The findings from this study largely confirm that the symbolic meaning of social media elicited by both technical and social cues could be characterized into two broad types (Table 3 and Table 4). Specifically, in the case of Moon Struck, WeChat represents sociality-oriented meaning (viz., a tool for social-relationship building and personal-image building) when technical features supporting interpersonal interactions are provided and social connections among interlocutors are strong and close. Values, such as intimate, frequent, immediate, and interactive communication are appreciated under this context.

In contrast, WeChat represents information dissemination-oriented meaning (viz., a tool for selling, branding and advertising) when technical features supporting information broadcasting are provided and social connections among interlocutors are weak and distant. Values, such as formal, infrequent communication are appreciated under this context.

In order to understand how these symbolic meanings arise through users' interpretations, it is necessary to unpack both the technical and social cues so as to examine which cues elicit a particular symbolic meaning and the corresponding usage patterns. This section provides a contextual (i.e., personal and business) presentation of our findings, via leveraging the symbolic interactionism as the analytic lens.

Table 2. Under Personal Communication Context				
Symbolic Cues		Symbolic Meanings		Actions
Technical Cues	Social Cues	Goals <i>(what the technology is used to do)</i>	Values <i>(what are the criteria and standards in terms of using the technology, e.g., language type, topics)</i>	Usage Patterns
High level of synchronicity	Strong and close relationships among users largely built in the real-world	To build relationship To build personal image	Communication Style: informal and intimate communication style Communication Frequency: high communication frequency Communication Velocity: rapid communication Level of Interactivity: high level of interactivity	Frequency: frequent reading Duration: long reading duration Location: ubiquitous location Information Ignorance: low level of information ignorance Communications: sales information avoiding; sociality-focused two-way communication
High level of reciprocity				
Multiple cues embedded				
Low level of reviewability				
Low level of rehearsability				

Table 3. Under Moon Struck's Business Communication Context of Moon Struck				
Symbolic Cues		Symbolic Meanings		Actions
Technical Cues	Social Cues	Goals <i>(what the technology is used to do)</i>	Values <i>(what are the criteria and standards in terms of using the technology, e.g., language type, topics)</i>	Usage Patterns
Low level of synchronicity	Weak and distant relationships among users built in the virtual world	To do branding To sell To do advertising	Communication Style: formal communication style Communication Frequency: low communication frequency Communication Velocity: low level of immediacy Level of Interactivity: low level of interactivity	Frequency: Infrequent reading Duration: short reading duration Location: Particular reading time and locations Information Ignorance: high level of information ignorance Communications: mostly are one-way selling-focused unidirectional communication
Low level of reciprocity				
Little cues embedded				
High level of reviewability				
High level of rehearsability				

4.1 Under Personal Communication Context

Moon Struck's followers used a WeChat personal account to engage in personal communication. As designed by WeChat, the technical features and functions of personal accounts were fixed and unmodifiable by individual users. The relationships between interlocutors in personal accounts were close and intimate. Specific types of symbolic meanings are derived from technical and social cues embedded in WeChat personal account in this context.

Technical Cues

We identify five different types of technical cues that elicit the symbolic meaning of WeChat under the personal communication context, viz., *high level of synchronicity*, *high level of reciprocity*, *multiple cues embedded*, and *low level of reviewability and low level of rehearsability*, as explained below. The interface of WeChat personal account is shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

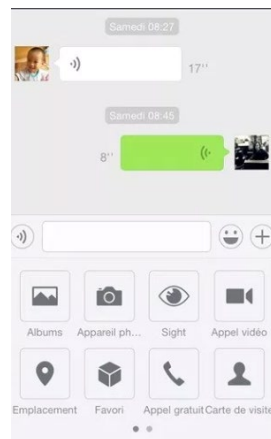


Figure 2. A Screenshot of Interpersonal Communication Interface⁵

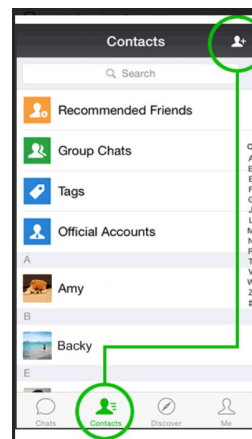


Figure 3. A Screenshot of Contact List⁶

High level of synchronicity: The level of synchronicity is the technical cue found to be associated with symbolic meaning in personal communication context. *Synchronicity* is defined as the degree to which users' input into a communication and the response they receive are simultaneous (Lowry et al. 2009). WeChat personal account was designed as an instant messenger, and there is hardly any delay in transmitting messages. Therefore, the high level of synchronicity enables followers to receive and send messages at the same time so as to effectively engage in communication. Users receive/send updated

⁵ Source: <https://visionarymarketing.com/en/blog/2016/01/how-to-explain-the-huge-success-of-wechat-in-china/>

⁶ Source: <https://www.quora.com/How-do-I-get-the-WeChat-ID-of-a-person>

information and socialize with friends. With the synchronized communications in WeChat personal account, the *symbolic meaning for social-relationship building* is prevalent in response to this cue. It suggests that a high level of synchronicity is useful for eliciting relationship-oriented communication on social media. As an informant indicated,

*When someone [from personal account] sends me a message on WeChat, I receive it immediately and the unread messages will be marked with red dots. I can easily notice these messages when I open WeChat page at any time. Therefore, I hardly ignore any messages. WeChat is a useful tool to **immediately communicate with friends** (Lily, an office lady, followed Moon Struck for more than a year).*

High level of reciprocity: *Reciprocity* refers to a high level of reciprocal communication and allows one or more senders and receivers to communicate with each other (Ou et al. 2014; Lowry et al. 2009). Media with high level of reciprocity enable users to engage in interactive communications and respond to each other's needs. WeChat supported two types of reciprocal communication for personal account: interpersonal communication (one-to-one), and group communication (many-to-many) (Cheng et al. 2017). Apart from basic peer-to-peer interpersonal communication, WeChat also supported group communication among more than two individuals. Members of groups could share common topics and interests in group discussions. The high level of reciprocity increases users' expectations on engaging and interactive communications. A high level of reciprocity is found to be associated with the symbolic meaning of WeChat, including *meaning of social-relationship building and personal-image building*. Some informants said,

*WeChat is a tool to **know how my friends' lives are going on**, especially those living abroad. I cannot meet them frequently. I talk to them, or check their updates in WeChat Moments. I can also call them, but phone call is not as convenient as WeChat. For example, sometimes they may be busy with talking to someone else (Helen, a student in college, the new follower of Moon Struck).*

*My colleagues and I have a discussion group on WeChat. We update our work status in the group, share files, and discuss work-related issues. Our boss is also in the group. It is **a great channel for us to show our working progress** to the boss as all the group members are able to see the discussions (Hans, a businessman, following Moon Struck for more than one year).*

Multiple cues embedded: *Cue multiplicity* is defined as the extent to which a medium can convey multiple cues relevant to the interaction (Jiang et al. 2013; Daft and Lengel 1986), such as verbal expressions, voice inflection, facial expression and body language (Dennis et al. 2008; Daft and Lengel 1986). WeChat

personal account enabled users to encode information in various formats, such as text, audio, video, and maps. Followers could engage in direct communication and sharing interests with friends or co-workers via WeChat. In response to the multiple cues embedded in communications, WeChat functions as *a tool for social-relationship building and personal-image building*.

*WeChat is **helpful to maintain relationships**. You can contact people without using WeChat, but you had better use it if you want to contact them easily. I always use it to share documents, and discuss with my friends or colleagues. It is quite convenient to chat by sending an audio message as I don't have to spend time on typing. I can also conveniently take a photo of myself and send it to friends* (Tracy, an office lady, the new follower of Moon Struck).

*WeChat is **a great way to show to your boss how hard you are working**. For example, I can send a message with a location map, indicating I am working overtime. I can also post pictures showing that I am on a business trip* (Ken, an office worker, following Moon Struck for more than six months).

Low level of reviewability: This cue refers to the extent to which the media enables a message to be reexamined or processed again, during decoding, either within the context of the communication event or after the event has passed (Dennis et al. 2008). The design of the message box of WeChat personal account was similar to the design of SMS message box, which provided limited service in information retrieval and archival store. Only messages sent within 9 months were saved in the WeChat server. Account holders could only reprocess the messages by either searching with accurate key words or looking for them one by one. During the interview, informants all agreed the helpfulness of WeChat personal account in relationship building, but their attitudes towards the use of WeChat personal account in information dissemination and broadcasting were more negative.

*Some of my colleagues or my boss like to send messages [about work-related information] in WeChat. It is convenient for those who send messages, but it is hard for people to read again [after receiving the messages]. It is **not a good way to talk about important things** [work-related] if you want to keep a record* (Selina, a businesswoman, the new follower of Moon Struck).

I won't choose WeChat [personal account] if I want to make an announcement ...It is too hard to retrospect, and it is not convenient to edit text, such as highlighting something (Ken).

Low level of rehearsability: The text editing window of WeChat was similar with that of SMS, that is, a long and narrow box that doesn't provide a format editing function. Therefore, users could only send text in default size, color and font. The difficulty of personal account in text editing and rehearsing reduces

users' desire to use it to broadcast information, such as sending advertisements and announcements. As an informant indicated,

*I think it is **not good to sell products through personal account**... Some people use personal account to send advertisements, but it is hard to polish content [in personal account]. They just copy and paste content. It is terrible to read large amounts of text without any focus.... I think it is important to carefully edit content and make it more visually appealing if you want to sell* (Elena, an office lady, following Moon Struck for more than six months).

Social Cues

Unlike other social media that was used to connect strangers in virtual worlds (such as Weibo and Twitter), the WeChat personal account was aimed at connecting people in an exclusive circle of real friends. For example, following a personal account on WeChat was more difficult than just clicking the button of “following”. Followers were required to have the account holders' phone number, accurate WeChat ID or QR code. Therefore, people need to meet each other face-to-face, or have mutual friends before they can connect on WeChat. The difficulty of following a stranger's personal account makes the online communication an extension of real-world communication. Therefore, as indicated by informants, they often used their WeChat personal account to communicate with “friends” and “colleagues”. None of them mentioned the use of WeChat for “knowing new people”. Therefore, the social relationships between followers and personal account holders are highly based on relationships in the real world. The close and strongly-connected relationships provided foundations for emotional attachment, such as trust and intimacy, and a high level of interactions. As a result, symbolic meanings of WeChat is associated with sociality with the purpose of relationship-building and image building.

The Symbolized Value of WeChat Personal Account

Based on the technical cues provided on the WeChat personal account and the social connections among users, four types of communication values were highly expected among followers, covering communication style, frequency, velocity and level of interaction. Specifically, followers expected an *intimate and informal communication style*.

*WeChat personal account represents an individual. Thus, I expect **casual and close communications**. **Sweet and gentle words** are especially welcomed by female WeChat users* (Emily, a secretary, following Moon Struck for more than one year).

In addition, followers also expected *frequent and immediate communication, and high level of interactivity,*

*I have talked to most personal accounts I have on WeChat. It is a little bit weird if you follow someone on WeChat, and never talk to him/her. If you want to communicate with someone frequently, WeChat is your best choice. It is great to **keep frequent connections** with people on WeChat (Peter, a model, the new follower of Moon Struck).*

*When I send someone an email, I won't expect a rapid reply. Communications on email can be delayed. I can wait until they are free to reply me during office hours. However, if I send him/her a WeChat message and he/she doesn't **reply me immediately**, I may be unhappy. I may think that he/she don't want to reply to me. I won't expect that [immediate reply] for email (Tracy).*

The Enactment of Symbolic Meaning and Action in Personal Communication Context

As illustrated above, WeChat personal account may symbolize a particular set of symbolic meanings to followers elicited by a confluence of technical cues and the social cues. The confluence of technical cues, together with social cues, interact in a reinforcing manner, eliciting certain symbolic meanings. Furthermore, we found that followers could use social media differently based on the symbolic meanings, leading to different usage patterns.

We found five patterns of use in personal communication context of WeChat: *high reading frequency; long reading duration; ubiquitous reading location; low level of information ignorance; sales information avoiding/sociality-focused communication.*

Followers had particular patterns when using WeChat in the personal communication context. Firstly, they *used WeChat and checked messages frequently*. Communication with friends *happened anytime and anywhere*. Secondly, information received in this context was *less likely to be ignored* on WeChat. As indicated by William, a business owner who has followed Moon Struck for more than one year: *"I cannot miss any messages [from personal account]. Sometimes I am too busy to read some messages. But I will check them later when I am free"*.

Notably, the ways in which people use their WeChat personal account are expected to be consistent with the symbolic meaning of technology. For example, when someone starts to sell products or services on WeChat (communication change from *sociality-focused* to *selling-focused*), their followers can hardly escape from the sales advertisements. In this case, WeChat is considered to be changed from a sociality-focused channel (relationship building or maintaining tool) to a sales channel. Then, friends who sell on WeChat would be hidden or removed in order to avoid the inconsistent symbolic meanings. As indicated by Emma, a worker from a bank, who has followed Moon Struck for more than six months:

Most of the people I follow on WeChat are my friends. We can communicate and share interesting things in our life. Some people who live abroad may post pictures of luxury bags, shoes or makeup on WeChat and sell to their WeChat friends. I don't like my friends doing this kind of thing on WeChat [personal account]. I am following him/her because he/she is my friend. I will hide her (don't receive messages) if he/she keeps on selling on WeChat.

4.1 Under Business Communication Context of Moon Struck

Moon Struck chose WeChat's official account as the platform to engage in business communication with followers. Unlike the fixed design of personal accounts, WeChat official accounts allow account holders to self-design some features and functions. In addition, the mode of communication between account holders and followers might be different based on the service fees the holders paid. We identify five different types of technical cues that elicit the symbolic meaning of WeChat under the business communication context of Moon Struck, viz., *low level of synchronicity, low level of reciprocity, few cues embedded, high level of reviewability, and high level of rehearsability.*

Technical Cues

Low level of synchronicity and low level of reciprocity: Just as with personal accounts, instant message transmission is available in Moon Struck's official account. However, as designed by WeChat, the messages from official accounts are automatically grouped into a bundle rather than displayed one by one so as to be separated from messages from personal accounts (Figure 3). Therefore, followers hardly notice the arrival of each single message, which tremendously delays the communication process. As indicated by Nancy, an employee from the Marketing and Communication department, Moon Struck paid for the advanced functions, which enabled messages to be unbundled and displayed as messages on the personal account. However, the number of messages it could send was restricted, and the messages received followers' messages were often delayed⁷. In addition, Moon Struck's account only allowed message broadcasting to all followers, and interpersonal communication between a follower and the account holder was not available unless the communication was initiated by the follower.

Due to the inherently restricted design of Moon Struck's account on WeChat, synchronicity and reciprocity are significantly hindered. Various symbolic meanings are elicited by the account in this context, including *advertising, branding and selling*. For example, Emily thought it was not helpful to communicate with Moon Struck on WeChat as its official account was only a tool for advertisement.

⁷ It was impossible for Moon Struck to eliminate the delay technically, and no official explanations were provided by WeChat on message delay. Based on the WeChat operation background of Moon Struck, messages sent from followers were either delayed or not received from time to time.

*WeChat's official account [the official account of Moon Struck] is just **an advertising platform**. I once tried to ask a question [to Moon Struck account], but I received the message after several days, and the reply was short and unclear. I was hurried to get the answer and finally I chose the phone call.*

Similarly, Patrick, a journalist who have followed Moon Struck for more than one year agreed that Moon Struck's official account is only for branding,

*Moon Struck's account is **for branding**... It [the official account of Moon Struck] won't reply to me immediately. Even if it responded, I cannot receive the message immediately. But I can receive the message alert from personal account immediately.*

High level of reviewability: In the profile page of Moon Struck's account, there was a button called View History, where all sent messages could be retrieved even after being deleted. Compared to personal account that only allows to search message with accurate key words, Moon Struck's included advanced search service in its official account, viz., fuzzy searching. It enabled followers to easily find information that may interest them. In response to this cue, symbolic meanings of *advertising and information dissemination* are prevalent, as supported by the following interview quotations.

*Sometimes I am too busy to read [messages from Moon Struck official account], I can easily check them later when I am free... I want to **know if there are any interesting events or promotions** [in Moon Struck], so I follow its official account. I can look for the information I am interested in (Linda, an office lady, following Moon Struck for more than one year).*

*I like the band live show in this bar [the bar in Moon Struck], so I followed this account and searched when this band will come again...Moon Struck's account is just another format of **advertisements**. It is the extension of print advertisements (William).*

High level of rehearsability:

Moon Struck paid for the advanced operation background (including both web and mobile version) of the official account, which allowed careful message design and editing before sending. In the account, an elaborate weekly e-journal including five to six messages was sent every Friday. The e-journal was typically designed as follows: 1) a primary message positioned in the first line with bigger pictures and highlighted titles; 2) several secondary messages positioned lower down with smaller pictures and normal titles (as shown in Figure 4). A single message contained one-hundred to three-hundred Chinese characters followed by English translations and pictures after every paragraph. The symbolic meanings of *advertising and company representative* are prevalent in response to this cue. As elaborated by Patrick below,

People are overloaded with information, so only carefully designed messages with pictures can attract their attention... In WeChat's operation background [official account], you could assure the quality of messages and pictures before sending rather than just send them casually. It is a good choice to do online advertisement via the official account.



Figure 4. A Screenshot of Official Accounts Lists in Chinese



Figure 5. A Screenshot of An E-journal from Moon Struck in Chinese

Social Cues

In contrast to the real-world relationships between personal account holders and followers, the relationships between the holder of Moon Struck's official account and followers may only be built in the virtual world. For example, followers could search the official account with a fuzzy key word, e.g., Moon Struck. Therefore, real contacts between followers and the account holders were not required. In the interview, three informants said that they had never been to Moon Struck before the interview. They were interested in the hotel, and then searched for and followed it. In addition, even though the specific name of account holder was indicated in the profile page, Moon Struck forbade followers from contacting with the holder on WeChat personally. Therefore, followers had neither real interactions nor emotional attachments with Moon Struck and the account holder. The only way they received information about this hotel and the account holder was through the virtual follower-following relationships on WeChat. The distant and virtual relationship between official account holders and followers restricted the probability of two-way interactions, such as relationship building. As a result, symbolic meanings can be characterized as information broadcasting and dissemination associated with selling, branding and advertising in the case context of Moon Struck.

The Symbolized Value of WeChat Official Account

The social and technical cues provided in Moon Struck's accounts elicit four types of communication values highly expected among followers, covering communication style, frequency, velocity and level of interaction. Specifically, followers expected a *formal and official communication style*,

*Moon Struck's official account represents the hotel... I am not sure if it is nice to have casual interactions with the account, but I prefer **formal and well-organized communication*** (Linda).

*Official account [the account of Moon Struck] is a company representative. It should **not be too personal and casual*** (Hans).

Compared to the personal account, Moon Struck's account symbolizes an official branding instead of a personal communication channel. Therefore, even though immediacy was appreciated when followers engage in personal communication on WeChat, the expectation was changed when they engage in the business communication with Moon Struck's account. *Low level of frequency, immediacy, and low level of interactivity* were expected,

*WeChat [Moon Struck's official accounts] is not a communication channel [between followers and accounts holders]. It is a public relations (PR) platform of the hotel. It is an official place. Companies are cautious about what they say, so information sent by Moon Struck [on WeChat] must be filtered by executives before it is sent. They [official account holders] cannot say what they just want to say. I assume **it is hard to interact** with the account holders* (Linda).

*It will **take a long time** to receive a reply from them [account holders]. They probably will only reply me when they get back to work. I don't want to send messages to them. If I want to do it [communication], I will choose phone or email instead of WeChat* (Helen).

*The official account [the account of Moon Struck] is just a robot. I won't have any attachment to it and I won't build a personal relationship with it. **Interaction is not necessary*** (William).

The Enactment of Symbolic Meaning and Action in Business Communication Context

Followers of Moon Struck behave in different ways when following personal and official accounts. Firstly, even though all interviewees admitted they use WeChat frequently, there was no implication that they read messages from Moon Struck's account frequently. Considering the fact that Moon Struck sent five to six messages to followers at one time, most of messages were ignored. All informants complained about the

length of messages and the limited amount of time they had to read these messages. Therefore, followers normally *checked messages from Moon Struck's official account less frequently* than messages from personal accounts.

In addition, followers were *selective about which messages they read*. Primary messages positioned in the first line were often read, while those messages located further down tended to be ignored. Thirdly, when they received a message, they *read it fast* by skimming the title and key words, and then they decided if they would like to continue reading it. Fourthly, even though most informants agreed that they check WeChat messages as quickly as possible, they only checked messages from Moon Struck *at a particular time*, e.g., on the way home, lunch break, after work, rather than at the time messages arrived.

5. Discussions

We argue that the symbolic meaning of social media and use patterns vary across communication contexts based on the varied technical and social cues. Specifically, symbolic meaning of social media could be shaped by both the technical features of the media and the social relationships among users. Symbolic interactionism suggests that social interaction is symbolic and processed in terms of the meanings people attach to it (Trevino et al. 1987). The main idea of this view includes the attached symbolic meaning, i.e., WeChat is characterized as a private communication tool, and actions are generated based on the meanings, i.e., it is frequently used to communicate with friends. Symbolic interactionism provides generic ideas such that individuals' behaviors towards an object could be explained by the symbolized meanings of the object derived from social interactions. Our data broadly supports the main idea of symbolic interactionism, and thus may be seen as empirical support for applying this theory in the IS context. However, we also go beyond this theory by developing our key findings into theoretical propositions and discussing the implications for the interaction of symbolic cues, meaning and use patterns.

In the case of Moon Struck, we found that the confluence of different types of technical cues links to different symbolic meanings of a social medium. Specifically, the high level of synchronicity and reciprocity of social media is conducive for interactive and two-way communications, which increases the symbolized sociality-related meaning of the media. In addition, the multiple cues embedded in social media, such as audio and video phone call, allows the transmission of nonverbal information, increasing the warmth, intimacy and interactivity users experience during the communication process (Walther 2011, p.445).

In Moon Struck's case, the design of the official account lacked synchronicity and reciprocity. For instance, the message alerts of official accounts were not synchronized in followers' message boxes, which may delay response time and decrease followers' tendency to engage in two-way communication. Moon Struck

was not able to initiate personal conversations with followers and was always late to reply to followers' queries, leading to more one-way broadcasting communication and less interaction. Moreover, Moon Struck's account was mainly designed as a text-based communication tool with few nonverbal cues available. As a result, Moon Struck's official account is less likely to be understood as a tool for social relationship building and maintaining.

Social-relationships on social media could be facilitated by real-time transmission of feedback among interlocutors (Lowry et al. 2009). Thus, immediacy and reciprocity of information transmission is paramount. The coordination and verification of understanding may be easily achieved during rapid and reciprocal communication. Personal conflicts in relationships, such as tensions and disagreements, can be dispelled at the moment they arise. Secondly, social presence is necessary to facilitate social relationships online (Ou et al. 2014). The various ways available for communication, including visual (video, animated sticker) and audio play a central role in building trust and familiarity between interlocutors, especially between those who are unknown to each other (Jiang et al. 2013; Daft and Lengel). Therefore, rich media, such as instant messengers, which enables the transmission of visual and voice cues, are best suited to performing social communication (Bartelt and Dennis 2014; Robert and Dennis 2005), and fostering relationships in the workplace (Ou and Davison 2015). In contrast, lean media, such as an online forum, are fairly deficient in providing visual communication. Their use may lead to relationship conflict and a sense of distance (Kock and Davison 2003). Thus, we summarize:

Proposition 1: The high levels of synchronicity, reciprocity and cue multiplicity play an important role in positioning a social medium to symbolize sociality-oriented meaning (e.g., social-relationship building and image building) to users.

We also found that the design of WeChat personal accounts and Moon Struck's official account involved varied features in terms of rehearsability and reviewability. For example, the text window areas where account holders could edit and polish text were smaller in personal accounts than in Moon Struck's official account, which leads to shorter and more concise conversations in personal accounts and longer and better-organized posts in the official account. In addition, Moon Struck's official account was provided with a specific operation background for typesetting and image editing. The features of Moon Struck's account supporting a high level of rehearsability, increased account holders' tendency to write in a more organized, clear and logical way, which facilitated more official information dissemination, such as news releases. In addition, all broadcasting information sent by Moon Struck was able to be retrieved and read back through message history even after the information had been deleted, which was not possible with personal accounts.

Information collection and dissemination are associated with a greater need to broadcast large amounts of high quality information to a targeted audience. Therefore, deliberation and organized thought are important

during information processing (Dennis et al. 2008). Media characterized by higher levels of reviewability enable users to carefully rehearse or fine tune a message before sending it. In addition, the high reviewability of a medium provides the potential for users to re-access and re-examine a message after the message has been sent. Readers may take enough time to digest disseminated information, which is essential in information contribution and seeking. Therefore, the high level of rehearsability and reviewability of social media may lead users to be more cautious during communication process, which causes the social media to be considered as a more serious and thoughtful tool.

Proposition 2: The high level of rehearsability and reviewability plays an important role in positioning a social media tool to symbolize information dissemination-oriented meaning (e.g., selling, branding and advertising) to users.

In the case of Moon Struck, the relationship distance between followers and account holders also had an important impact on users' illustrations of the symbolic meaning of the medium. Specifically, when the majority of relationships among users on social media are close and real-world based, more sociality-oriented communications may appear. The communications are more likely to be intimate, frequent, interactive and immediate. Therefore, the personal account elicits more sociality-oriented meanings to the users. In contrast, when the relationships between a follower and the WeChat official account are virtual and distant, the high level of interactions among interlocutors are less likely to happen. Users are less likely to interpret social-oriented meaning. Symbolic meanings associated with information dissemination are more likely to be elicited. Previous studies have found that the relationship among interlocutors has a positive influence on online communication (e.g., Shi et al. 2014).

Proposition 3: The distance of relationships among interlocutors plays an important role in the development of the symbolic meaning of a social medium.

As illustrated by the findings, followers generate different use patterns following the different elicited symbolic meanings in personal and business communication contexts. The use patterns of *high reading frequency, long reading duration, ubiquitous reading location, low level of information ignorance, and sales information avoidance* emerge from the symbolic meaning of personal account as a sociality-oriented tool. In contrast, the use patterns of *low reading frequency, short reading duration, particular reading timing and locations, high level of information ignorance, and selling-focused communication* emerge from the symbolic meaning of official accounts as a tool oriented to information-dissemination.

Specifically, in the personal communication context, WeChat's personal account is characterized as a sociality-oriented tool elicited by specific technical features. A group of use patterns emerges as a result of the interpreted symbolic meaning. Followers frequently used the technology and messages were checked

at any time and any location. They preferred to read messages at the time when they received them and generally didn't ignore messages. Most importantly, selling-focused communications were strongly avoided as they were not consistent with users' interpreted symbolic meanings of the tool, i.e. the sociality-oriented meaning. In contrast, in the business communication context, Moon Struck's official account is regarded as a selling and advertising-related information dissemination tool. Compared to the personal account, the frequency of checking messages from Moon Struck's account was lower. In addition, the time spent on reading messages was much shorter. Reading was delayed until followers are available. Information was largely ignored. Consistent with the elicited official and formal meanings of Moon Struck's account, interaction between followers and Moon Struck was considered as unnecessary. Apparently, the symbolic meaning of social media provides a guideline for followers to judge and evaluate how the tools are expected to be used. It may trigger or constrain certain behaviors even without followers' conscious thought (Bartelt and Dennis 2014). The media interpreted as sociality-oriented is less likely to be used when the substance of a conversation involves official, formal or selling-oriented behaviour. Similarly, the media interpreted as information dissemination-oriented is less likely to be used when the conversation aims at sharing intimate and emotional information. We thus summarize:

Proposition 4: The symbolic meaning of a social medium may affect the development of use patterns by both account holders and followers.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

In this research, we contribute to the literature by generalizing our findings (following the principles of Lee and Baskerville, 2003, 2012) into four theoretical propositions that encapsulate the relationships between symbolic cues, meanings, and media use patterns. We expect our contribution to be threefold. Firstly, we contributed to symbolic interactionism, which highlights the intertwined relationships between symbolic meanings of objects and people's responses to the objects. By applying this theoretical perspective in the IS context, we confirm the role of symbolic meaning in leading people's actions. Moreover, we identify the specific cues elicited symbolic meanings of social media under a particular communication context, and the generated usage patterns.

Secondly, we contribute to current IS research with respect to the symbolic meaning of technology. Although symbolic meaning of technology has been explored in previous IS work, it is regarded as having a unitary meaning regardless of context. For example, Tan et al. (2014) found that 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 have yet to identify how exactly a technology represents different meanings for a user group in different social contexts. To our knowledge, this is the

first study that examines the cues eliciting symbolic meanings and the divergent use patterns in social media. Importantly, we abstract the specific technical and social cues that elicit the symbolic meaning of a social medium. Such abstractions provide a conceptual basis for future research to investigate the key symbolic meaning of social media theoretically.

Finally, we extend prior work on social media for both personal and business communication. The literature on social media for personal communication depends on either technology-related or social-related factors in predicting the general use of technology. We found that both technical and social cues are important in stimulating symbolic meanings of social media, and the corresponding divergent media use patterns. Among the social media research for business communication, even though an increasing volume of research has confirmed the failures of social media in this particular context, limited explanations are provided. By adopting the perspective of symbolic interactionism, we found that some media may not be appropriate for companies to build relationships with customers due to the specific meaning that the technology symbolizes under the business communication context. This research opens vistas for future research to investigate the symbolic meaning of social media in explaining its impact on both personal and business communication.

This research also intends to provide insights for companies, which may take for granted the notion 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 found that followers respond to WeChat messages in different contexts differently. We suggest that a learning organization should listen to customers' opinions regarding its use of social media for business communication. In other words, companies should design their digital business strategy based on customers' interpretation and related use of a particular technology.

In addition, we seek to provide suggestions for designers of social media. Currently, social media designers try to achieve a balance between attracting active individual users and earning money from corporate users. Thus, designers can develop functions to support both personal communication and business communication. However, we observe that individual use patterns of social media are 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 individual users' constructed symbolic meaning of the technology when they develop new functions.

Secondly, organizations interested in adopting social media may be careful in assessing the symbolic meaning of different social media tools and adopt them for appropriate purposes. Even though the capabilities of two media tools might be similar, it is possible that one tool is more suitable for some tasks than another due to its symbolic meaning. For example, Weibo (a social medium equivalent to Twitter) may be more appropriate for news broadcasting than customer relationship building in public relationship management if the symbolic meaning interpreted by most Weibo users is that it is official instead of intimate. High communication performance will only be achieved when there is a fit between the symbolic meaning of media and the purposes of using the media.

7. Limitations, Future Research and Conclusions

The generalizability of our research findings is limited by the fact that we have only examined at one hotel's use of a particular social medium, WeChat. Therefore, there are many promising avenues for further research to build on this study. Future examinations of other social media platforms in other organizational contexts may suggest different types of symbolic meanings, cues, and use patterns, and thereby extend our findings. As we have provided four propositions based on the findings from a particular research context, future research may further validate and extend this research by empirically examining the propositions in broader contexts. In addition, as symbolic interaction is a process, longitudinal examination of symbolic cues, meanings and actions could be undertaken to reveal more about the intertwined relationships. The reversed impact of people's actions on generating symbolic meanings could also be investigated in future research.

To conclude, even though most research on 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., Scott and Orlikowski 2014; Miranda and Saunders 2003; Gopal and Prasad 2000). In this paper, we report on a case study where a company's ambition to use WeChat to build a close relationship with customers turned out not to be feasible, as its ambition is not consistent with the meanings symbolized by the hotel's social media account in a business communication context. Our research suggests that symbolic meaning of social media interpreted by users is necessary to be understood as it reflects users' understanding towards the media, which may completely deviate from that of designers and organizations, and may further influence the way the media is used.

References

- Aakhus, M., Ågerfalk, P. J., Lyytinen, K. and Te'eni, D. (2014). Symbolic Action Research in Information Systems: Introduction to the Special Issue, *MIS Quarterly* 38(4): 1187-1200.
- Aral, S., Dellarocas, C. and Godes, D. (2013). Introduction to the Special Issue-Social Media and Business Transformation: A Framework for Research, *Information Systems Research* 24(1): 3-13.
- Bartelt, V. L. and Dennis, A. R. (2014). Nature and Nurture: The Impact of Automaticity and the Structuration of Communication on Virtual Team Behavior and Performance, *MIS Quarterly* 38(2): 521-538.
- Blumer, H. 1969, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspectives and Method*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Cecez-Kecmanovic, D., Galliers, R. D., Henfridsson, O., Newell, S. and Vidgen, R. (2014). The Sociomateriality of Information Systems: Current Status, Future Directions, *MIS Quarterly* 38(3): 809-830.
- Cheng, X., Fu, S. and Vreede, G.-J. d. (2017). Understanding Trust Influencing Factors in Social Media Communication: A Qualitative Study, *International Journal of Information Management* 37: 25-35.
- Curtis, A. M., Dennis, A. R. and McNamara, K. O. (2017). From Monologue to Dialogue: Performative Objects to Promote Collective Mindfulness in Computer-Mediated Team Discussions, *MIS Quarterly* 41(2): 559-581.
- Cvijikj, I. P. and Michahelles, F. (2013). Online Engagement Factors on Facebook Brand Pages. *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 3(4): 843-861.
- Daft, R. L. and Lengel, R. H. (1986). Organizational Information Requirements, Media Richness and Structural Design, *Management Science* 32(5): 554-571.
- Davison, R. M., Ou, C. X. J. and Martinsons, M. G. (2018). Interpersonal Knowledge Exchange in China: The Impact of Guanxi and Social Media, *Information & Management* 55(2): 224-234.
- DeSanctis, G. and Poole, M. S. (1994). Capturing the Complexity in Advanced Technology Use: Adaptive Structuration Theory, *Organization Science* 5(2): 121-147.
- Dennis, A. R., Fuller, R. M. and Valacich, J. S. (2008). Media, Tasks, and Communication Processes: A Theory of Media Synchronicity, *MIS Quarterly* 32(3): 575-600
- Dionysiou, D. D. and Tsoukas, H. (2012). Understanding the (Re)Creation of Routines from Within: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective, *Academy of Management Review* 38(2): 181-205.
- Dolan, R., Conduit, J., Fahy, J. and Goodman, S. (2016). Social Media Engagement Behaviour: A Uses and Gratifications Perspective, *Journal of Strategic Marketing* 24(3-4): 261-277.
- Fulk, J. (1993). Social Construction of Communication Technology, *Academy Management Journal* 36(5): 921-950.
- Galluch, P. S., Crover, V. and Thatcher, J. B. (2015). Interrupting the Workplace: Examining Stressors in an Information Technology Context, *Journal of the Association for Information Systems* 16(1): 1-47.
- Goh, K.-Y., Heng, C.-S. and Lin, Z. (2015). Social Media Brand Community and Consumer Behavior: Quantifying the Relative Impact of User- and Marketer-generated Content, *Information Systems Research* 24(1): 88-107.
- Gopal, A. and Prasad, P. (2000). Understanding GDSS in Symbolic Context: Shifting the Focus from Technology to Interaction, *MIS Quarterly* 24(3): 509-546.

- Grgecic, D. Holten, R. and Rosenkranz, C. (2015). The Impact of Functional Affordances and Symbolic Expressions on the Formation of Beliefs, *Journal of the Association for Information Systems* 16(7): 580-607.
- John, L. K., Emrich, O., Gupta, S. and Norton, M. I. (2017). Does “Liking” Lead to Loving? The Impact of Joining a Brand’s Social Network on Marketing Outcomes, *Journal of Marketing Research* 54(1): 144-155.
- Jung, Y. and Lyytinen, K. (2014). Towards an Ecological Account of Media Choice: A Case Study on Pluralistic Reasoning while Choosing Email, *Information Systems Journal* 24(3): 271-293.
- Leonardi, P. M. (2013). When Does Technology Use Enable Network Change in Organizations? A Comparative Study of Feature Use and Shared Affordances, *MIS Quarterly* 37(3): 749-775.
- Jiang, L. C., Bazarova, N. N. and Hancock, J. T. (2013). From Perception to Behavior: Disclosure Reciprocity and the Intensification of Intimacy in Computer-Mediated Communication, *Communication Research* 40(1): 125-143.
- Kock, N. and Davison, R. M. (2003). Can Lean Media Support Knowledge Sharing? Investigating A Hidden Advantage of Process Improvement, *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management* 50(2): 151-163.
- Lee, A. S. and Baskerville, R. L. (2012). Conceptualizing Generalizability: New Contributions and A Reply, *MIS Quarterly* 36(3): 749-761.
- Lee, A. S. and Baskerville, R. L. (2003). Generalizing Generalizability in Information Systems Research, *Information Systems Research* 14(3): 221-243.
- Lien, C. H. and Cao, Y. (2014). Examining Wechat Users’ Motivations, Trust, Attitudes, and Positive Word-of-Mouth: Evidence from China, *Computers in Human Behavior* (41): 104-111.
- Liu, Y., Tan, C.-H. and Sutanto, J. (2018). A Media Symbolism Perspective on the Choice of Social Sharing Technologies, *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications* (29): 19-29.
- Lowry, P. B., Nicholas, C. Romano, J., Jenkins, J. L. and Guthrie, R. W. (2009). The CMC Interactivity Model: How Interactivity Enhances Communication Quality and Process Satisfaction in Lean-Media Groups, *Journal of Management Information Systems* 26(1): 155-195.
- Markus, M. L. and Silver, M. S. (2008). A Foundation for the Study of IT Effects: A New Look at DeSanctis and Poole’s Concepts of Structural Features and Spirit, *Journal of the Association for Information Systems* 9(10): 609-632.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, Self and Society: From the Standpoint of A Social Behaviorist*, London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, A. R. and Tucker, C. (2013). Active Social Media Management: The Case of Health Care, *Information Systems Research* 24(1): 52-70.
- Miranda, S. M. and Saunders, C. S. (2003). The Social Construction of Meaning: An Alternative Perspective on Information Sharing, *Information Systems Research* 14(1): 87-106.
- O’Leary, M. B., Wilson, J. M. and Metiu, A. (2014). Beyond Being There: The Symbolic Role of Communication and Identification in Perceptions of Proximity to Geographically Dispersed Colleagues, *MIS Quarterly* 38(4): 1219-1243.
- Orlikowski, W. J. and Gash, D. C. (1994). Technological Frames: Making Sense of Information Technology in Organizations, *ACM Transactions on Information Systems* 12(2): 174-207.

- Ou, C. X., Pavlou, P. A. and Davison, R. M. (2014). Swift Guanxi in Online Marketplaces: The Role of Computer-Mediated-Communication Technologies, *MIS Quarterly* 38(1): 209-230.
- Prasad, P. (1993). Symbolic Process in the Implementation of Technological Change: A Symbolic Interactionist Study of Work Computerization, *Academy of Management Journal* 36(6): 1400-1429.
- Rajao, R. and Marcolino, C. (2016). Between Indians and “Cowboys”: The Role of ICT in the Management of Contradictory Self-images and the Production of Carbon Credits in the Brazilian Amazon, *Journal of Information Technology* 31(4): 347-357.
- Richey, M and Ravishankar, MN (2019) The role of frames and cultural toolkits in establishing new connections for social media innovation, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 144: 325-333.
- Robert, L. and Dennis, A. R. (2005). The Paradox of Richness: A Cognitive Model of Media Choice, *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 48(1): 10–21.
- Saunders, C. and Jones, J. W. (1990). Temporal Sequences in Information Acquisition for Decision Making: A Focus on Source and Medium, *Academy of Management Review* 15(1): 29-46.
- Saeed, K. A. and Abdinnour, S. (2013). Understanding Post-adoption IS Usage Stages: An Empirical Assessment of Self-service Information Systems, *Information Systems Journal* 23(3): 219-244.
- Salo, M. and Frank, L. (2015). User Behaviours after Critical Mobile Application Incidents: The Relationship with Situational Context, *Information Systems Journal* 27(1): 5-30.
- Scott, S. V. and Orlikowski, W. J. (2014). Entanglements in Practice: Performing Anonymity through Social Media, *MIS Quarterly* 38(3): 873-893.
- Shi, Z., Rui, H., and Whinston, A. B. (2014). Content Sharing in a Social Broadcasting Environment: Evidence from Twitter, *MIS Quarterly* 38(1): 123-142.
- Stein, M.-K., Newell, S., Wagner, E. and Galliers, R. D. (2015). Coping with Information Technology: Mixed Emotions, Vacillation and Non-conforming Use Patterns, *MIS Quarterly* 39(2): 367-392.
- Stieglitz, S. and Dang-Xuan, L. (2013). Emotions and Information Diffusion in Social Media-Sentiment of Microblogs and Sharing Behavior, *Journal of Management Information Systems* 29(4): 217-248.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, CA: Sage Publications.
- Stryker, S. and Statham, A. (1985). Symbolic Interaction and Role Theory in *New Handbook of Social Psychology*. NY: Random House.
- Stephen, A. T. and Galak, J. (2012). The Effects of Traditional and Social Earned Media on Sales: A Study of a Microlending Marketplace, *Journal of Marketing Research* 49(5): 624-639.
- Stephens, K. and Rains, S. (2011). Information and Communication Technology Sequences and Message Repetition in Interpersonal Interaction, *Communication Research* 38(1): 101-122.
- Tan, C.-H., Sutanto, J., Phang, C. W. and Gasimov, A. (2014). Using Personal Communication Technologies for Commercial Communications: A Cross-Country Investigation of Email and SMS, *Information Systems Research* 25(2): 307-327.
- Treem, J. W., Dailey, S. L., Pierce, C. S. and Leonardi, P. M. (2015). Bringing Technological Frames to Work: How Previous Experience with Social Media Shapes the Technology's Meaning in an Organization, *Journal of Communication* 65(2): 396-422.

- Trevino, L. K., Lengel, R. H. and Daft, R. L. (1987). Media Symbolism, Media Richness, and Media Choice in Organizations: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective, *Communication Research* 14(5): 553-574.
- Trusov, M., Bucklin, R. E. and Pauwels, K. (2009). Effects of Word-of-Mouth versus Traditional Marketing: Findings from An Internet Social Networking Site, *Journal of Marketing* 73(5): 90-102.
- Tsai, W. H. S. and Men, L. R. (2013). Motivations and Antecedents of Consumer Engagement with Brand Pages on Social Networking Sites, *Journal of Interactive Advertising* 13(2):76-87.
- Turner, J. H. (2006). *Handbook of Sociological Theory*, New York: Springer Science & Business Media.
- Walsham, G. (2006). Doing Interpretive Research, *European Journal of Information Systems* (15): 320-330.
- Walther, J. B. (2011). "Theories of Computer-Mediated Communication and Interpersonal Relations" in *The Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*, 4, pp. 443-479, CA: Sage.
- WeChat Data Report. 2018. <https://support.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/mmsupport-bin/getopendays>.
- Yadav, M. S. and Pavlou, P. A. (2014). Marketing in Computer-Mediated Environments: Research Synthesis and New Directions, *Journal of Marketing* 78(1): 20-40.
- Yin., Robert K. (2009). *Case Study Research: Design and Method*, London: Sage Publications.
- Young, M.-L., Kuo, F.-Y. and Myers, M. D. (2012). To Share or Not to Share: A Critical Research Perspective on Knowledge Management Systems, *European Journal of Information Systems* 21(5): 496-511.
- Zott, C. and Huy, Q. N. (2007). How Entrepreneurs Use Symbolic Management to Acquire Resources, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 52(1): 70-105.

Appendix A

Table A1 A List of Empirical Research on Social Media for Personal Communication							
Citations	Theoretical Foundations	Antecedents				Context-related Factors	Outcomes
		Technology-related factors	User-related factors	Social relationship-related Factors	Context-related Factors		
Curtis et al. (2017)	The design of performative objects	The different technical features between text chat tool and chat plus whiteboard tool				Four appropriations: information aggregation; discussion of information distribution; discussion of criteria and voting	Collective mindfulness; decision quality
Dolan et al. (2016)	Uses and gratifications theory	Information content; entertaining content; remunerative content; relational content					Co-creation; positive contribution; consumption; dormancy; detachment; negative contribution; co-destruction
Epinosa et al. (2015)	Organizational studies on temporal separation				Temporal distance; communication frequency; turn-taking	Conveyance; convergence	Task completion speed and task product quality
Galluch et al. (2015)	The transaction model of stress	Quantitative demand; message profile	Timing control			method control; resource control	work overload; job conflict
Lee et al. (2015)	Self-determination theory		Need for Autonomy; need for relatedness; need for competence			Perceived enjoyment; performance expectancy	Technology use

Lu et al. (2016)	Social capital theory			Reciprocity; in-degree centrality; out-degree centrality; shared topics			Job performance
Addas and Pinsonneault (2015)	Literature on IT interruptions	Multimodal notification alerts; parallelism; reviewability					Effectiveness; efficiency
Maier et al. (2015)	Literature on technostress	Social media stress creators (complexity, uncertainty, invasion); disclosure; pattern	Social overload			Social media exhaustion	Discontinuous usage intention; discontinuous usage behavior
Treem et al. (2015)	Literature on technological frame		Technology frame				Perceived usefulness
Bartelt and Dennis (2014)	Structuration theory	Features and social structures of instant messenger (IM) and discussion forum (DF)				Time pressure	Different discussion content on IM and DF
Back et al. (2014)	Language action view		Knowledge seeker characteristics (social status, channel variety, social presence) Knowledge contributor characteristics (reputation, habit of cooperation,	Relationship characteristics (norm of reciprocity, indebtedness, relationship strength, intellectual closeness, cultural closeness)			Quality of knowledge exchanged

			group identification)				
Davison et al. (2014)	Communicative ecology		Media preferences		manager support		Vertical and horizontal communication
Limbu et al. (2014)	Literature on information and communication technology		Technology orientation		Organizational investment in infrastructure; training; support		Administrative performance; outcome performance; job satisfaction
Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013)	Uses and Gratifications theory	Media type (vividness; interactivity); content type (entertainment; information; remuneration)			Posting time (workday; peak hours)		Likes; comments; shares; interaction duration
Tsai and Men (2013)			Social media dependency	Parasocial interaction; perceived source credibility; community identification			Consumer engagement with Facebook brand pages
Ayyagari et al. (2011)	Literature on person-environment fit and stress	Usability features (usefulness, complexity, reliability); dynamic features (pace of change); intrusive features (presenteeism, anonymity)					work-home conflict; invasion of privacy; work overload; role ambiguity; job insecurity
Lin and Lu (2011)	Motivation theory and			Network externalities (number of			Continued intention to use

	network externalities			members, number of peers, perceived complementarity)			
Honey and Herring (2009)	Literature on Twitter	Addressivity; coherence					Responses to messages received on Twitter

Table A2 A List of Empirical Research on Social Media for Business Communication

Citations	Theoretical Foundations	Antecedents				Context-related Factors	Outcomes
		Technology-related factors	User-related factors	Social relationship-related Factors	Context-related Factors		
Liu et al. (2018)	Media symbolism	Symbolism of social media					The sharing of commercial and noncommercial content
John et al. (2017)	Literature on peer influence in social media marketing	Friends' act of 'liking' a brand on Facebook					Brand attitude and purchasing
Ou et al. (2014)	Literature on guanxi and media synchronicity theory	Effective use of online communication technologies, including instant messaging, message box, and feedback system				Interactivity, presence, swift guanxi, trust	Repurchase intentions; actual repurchases
Shi et al. (2014)	Social exchange theory and literature on content sharing			The unidirectional-relationship/weak ties			Probability of content sharing and probability of consumption

Miller and Tucker (2013)	Literature on user-generated content	User-generated content from organizational employees on social media				Attitude	Clients' avoidance of the organization's page
Angella and Eunju (2012)	Literature on social media marketing activities	Social media marketing activities				Value equity; relationship equity; brand equity	Purchase intention; customer loyalty
Stephen and Galak (2012)	Literature on paid, owned, and earned media	Marketing activities on social media and marketing activities on traditional media					Pre-event sales
Stephens and Rains (2011)	ICT succession theory and literature on communication redundancy	Use of complementary media				Overload; information effectiveness; recall	Attitude towards advertisements and behavioral intention
Trusov et al. (2009)	Literature on effectiveness of WOM marketing and social networking sites	WOM activities on social media					Member growth

Appendix B

The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol comprising two major sections. In the first section A, interviewees were asked to answer general questions about their opinions and usage behaviours with WeChat personal account. In the section B, we asked specific questions about their experience with following Moon Struck’s WeChat account to solicit their more detailed opinions.

Table B1. Interview Protocol		
	A. WeChat personal account	B. Moon Struck WeChat official account
Symbolic Meanings	A1. How do you think about WeChat in general?	B1. How do you think about Moon Struck official account?
	A2. How do you think about WeChat personal account?	B2. What kinds of messages do you expect to receive from Moon Struck official account?
	A3. What kinds of messages do you expect to receive from WeChat personal account?	B3. Why do you choose to follow Moon Struck official account?
	A/B 4. How do you think about receiving messages from personal and official account (e.g. Moon Struck)? Are they the same or different to you?	
	A/B 5. If you need to communicate with somebody, which social medium would you like to choose? Why? How about to broadcast information?	
Technical Cues	A6. which parts are you satisfied/dissatisfied with WeChat personal account?	B6. which parts are you satisfied /dissatisfied with Moon Struck official account?
Social Cues	A7. What kinds of contacts you have on WeChat personal account?	B7. How many official accounts you have followed? Why you follow them?
Use patterns	A8. How do you respond to messages received from personal account? (e.g., how often you check, how long you will spend on reading?)	B8. How do you respond to messages received from personal account? (e.g., how often you check, how long you will spend on reading?)
	A9. How do you think about receiving commercials via personal account?	B9. How do you think about interpersonal interactions with Moon Struck official account?

Appendix C. Coding Scheme and Examples for Business Communication

Interview Quotations	Concepts	Sub-Themes	Overarching Themes
<p>“I once tried to ask a question to Moon Struck, but I received the message after several days, and the reply was short and unclear. I was hurried to get the answer and finally I chose the phone call.”</p> <p>“Sometimes I am too busy to read, I can easily check it back when I am free.”</p> <p>“You could assure the quality of messages and pictures before sending rather than just send them causally.”</p>	<p>Low level of synchronicity</p> <p>High level of reviewability</p> <p>High level of rehearsability</p>	<p>Technical cues</p>	<p>Symbolic cues</p>
<p>“I know the account is managed by Lee, but I didn’t know her in person. I tried to contact with her through WeChat, but I failed.”</p> <p>“I haven’t been to Moon Struck before. I followed it because it was recommended by other accounts.”</p>	<p>Distant relationships among interlocutors</p>	<p>Social cues</p>	
<p>“Moon Struck public account represents the hotel. It shows the overall firm culture and helps to build a good image of the firm.”</p> <p>“Moon Struck’s account 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 follow Moon Struck on my phone, advertisements go with me.”</p>	<p>To do branding</p> <p>To do advertising</p>	<p>Goals</p>	<p>Symbolic Meanings</p> <p>Symbolic Meanings</p>
<p>“I am not sure if it is nice to have causal interactions with the account, but I prefer formal and well-organized communication.”</p>	<p>Formal communication style</p>	<p>Values</p>	

<p>“I don’t like Moon Struck’s accounts send me messages every day.”</p> <p>“Moon Struck won’t reply to me immediately because there might not be a specific employee responsible for answering questions on WeChat. If I want to contact with Moon Struck, I will choose phone or email instead of WeChat”</p> <p>“I won’t appreciate interaction with Moon Struck on WeChat. It is not human. It represents the image of the company”.</p>	<p>Low communication frequency</p> <p>Low level of immediacy</p> <p>Low level of interactivity</p>		
<p>“I won’t check messages from Moon Struck at the time they send to me.”</p> <p>“The account is just an advertisement channel. 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 normally read messages from Moon Struck when I have free time, such as in a boring meeting or during the traffic.</p> <p>“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”.</p> <p>“I followed Moon Struck to collect coupons and information of the restaurant.”</p>	<p>Low reading frequency</p> <p>Particular reading time and locations</p> <p>High level of information ignorance</p> <p>Selling-focused communication</p>		<p>Actions</p>

