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A Worthy Social Media Alternative Tool: WeChat

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1. Introduction

Human communication has changed its complexion in recent decades drastically by going cyber, without it being necessary for people to have direct contact with whomever it is that they interact. Facebook and Twitter have become the platforms offering excellent communication opportunities along with a range of other features, yet they are far from alone in providing the respective services. These and other well-known social media may have been facing increasing competition from WeChat, a China-based social platform, that has come to offer a wide range of opportunities ranging from communication and gaming to business analytics and bill payment. Despite not being a long-standing player in the market and having some minor disadvantages, it has gained a huge following. Where its users are largely based, according to Bhagat (2016), is in China, yet it can increase the user base with the passage of time by stepping up its foreign presence. Thus, WeChat is an excellent alternative to top social media platforms with a multitude of features that make it a must-use or must-copy network that may have quite a bright future, especially if outside China.

2. WeChat History

According to Millward (2018), in October 2010, a small team got working on a mobile chat app in a Tencent office in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou. On January 21, 2011, Tencent debuted the messaging app called Weixin in Chinese that offered three basic features, such as sending photos, creating voice clips, and text messaging. In August 2011, WeChat added a “find nearby users” function as well as video clips. In March 2012, the platform reached a high of 100 million registered users when it was just 14 months into its life. In April 2012, an update added in the Portuguese, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Thai languages, with English added earlier. In June 2012, Tencent pushed the platform into India with a celebrity-filled launch involving expensive ads on Facebook. In July 2012, video and voice calls are introduced. In January 2013, WeChat was caught censoring its users across the globe. In January 2013, the landmark of 300 million users was reached. In February 2013, WeChat managed to surpass Weibo as the favorite social app in China.

In July 2013, the platform made a promotional effort by recruiting Lionel Messi, a renowned soccer star. In May 2014, Tencent permitted businesses of whatever size to launch a store insider a brand account registered on WeChat. In June 2014, the feature of cash transfers was brought into existence. In January 2015, big brands started purchasing ads that found their way into the WeChat Moments feed letting users comment on and like ads. In March 2015, the platform announced it had reached the rate of 500 million monthly users by the end of 2014. While seeking to tap into the country’s big-

spending tourists, the platform went global with its in-store payments in February 2016. To this end, the network signed up stores across the globe provided that they were ready to scan QR codes with their cash registers. The 700-million mark was reached in March 2016. In summer 2016, WeChat became responsible for 35% of the time Chinese residents spend using their phones. WeChat began 2017 by introducing mini-programs apps (Millward, 2018).

In May 2017, a search engine was launched that became equivalent to the internet as such as the content posted to WeChat daily was aplenty, including news posted by media outlets. In November 2017, the platform approached the 1-billion mark as it has 980 million users on a monthly basis, while the valuation of WeChat climbed to \$0,5 trillion in the same month. The next month, the platform brought about instant games, including Tiao Yi Tiao that went viral despite being but a jumping challenge. In December 2017, WeChat became the storage option for the national identity cards in one of the cities, with ID cards connected with WeChat via facial recognition. Furthermore, a number of cities enabled riders to scan their phones swiftly at the gate to pay for transport. In January 2018, reports spread of WeChat storing the chat history of users, which the network denied. In the same month, Tencent reconciled with Apple having previously fallen out over the in-app tips for bloggers provided by WeChat (Millward, 2018). Over these years, WeChat has managed to secure quite an imposing position amongst the social-media elite.

3. WeChat Performance Data: Rankings & Regional Presence

The number of app users was estimated at almost 700 million as of the time of writing (Bhagat, 2016). In what is to follow, a different figure is produced as the evidence of WeChat's exponential growth although the platform is not close enough to matching the audience of top competitors like Facebook. Bucher (2019) provided an overview of the share enjoyed by each social platform as of July 2019. Facebook is atop the standings with 2 billion and 375 million unique users. YouTube sits second with 2 billion users. WhatsApp made the top three with 1,6 billion. FB Messenger lies fourth with 1,3 billion users. Weixin otherwise known as WeChat has 1 billion and 112 million individuals using it in some way or other. When it comes to the social apps' situation in the Asia-Pacific region, the Chinese product does not hold a superior position either. WhatsApp tops the list with 1 billion users. Behind it stands Facebook Messenger used by 800 million residents. Position #3 is held by WeChat employed by 650 million users (Bucher, 2019). Thus, WeChat has slightly more than half Facebook's audience, yet laying Facebook and its messenger spinoff end to end gives over 3 billion users, which is triple the consumer base of WeChat. For the Chinese social platform to be somewhat lagging behind the industry heavyweights may be down to its heavy presence in mainland China rather than elsewhere, which would give a chance to win over a larger share of the international social media audience. Brennan (2015) showed that mainland China was the chief region of WeChat use suggesting that 87% of its users come therefrom. By contrast, the rest of the world is responsible only for 13% of the platform's users (Brennan, 2015). Unfortunately, researchers have not sought fit to provide the by-continent

breakdown of the platform's application that seems rather scarcely represented beyond China. Still, chances are that the percentage of non-China WeChat users will swell in the coming time given the platform's benefits shaped by its features making for unique and entertaining user experience.

4. The Benefits and Features That WeChat Offers

4.1. The Unique World of WeChat

According to Bhagat (2016), the Chinese messaging app WeChat appears akin to its western analogs, such as Viber and Facebook-owned WhatsApp, which it does on the surface. By enabling users to share videos, photos, or other files and send text messages to others over the internet, it approaches major social platforms like Facebook. At a closer inspection, it is possible to see that WeChat does better than enabling messaging. Still, rather than be but a messaging platform, it is more of a mixture of social media, social gaming, and messaging. Paying bills, ordering noodles, playing games, using the Moments feature, keeping up with what friends are doing, sending a text message, using the voice call feature, or talking to a friend has never been easier (Bhagat, 2016). It would be better not to look at the utility of the platform from an overly generalized perspective; thus, a specific look should be optimal.

4.2. WeChat, a Worthy Social Media Alternative for the Chinese

There where Western social platforms are under the ban, a social media alternative like WeChat is as good as any, yet it may be even better in some ways. Bhagat (2016) showed that "Moments" were the major social media feature of WeChat that is virtually a blend of Twitter and Facebook that lies on top of the base WeChat experience. Similarly to the mentioned platforms, "Moments" allow users to maintain a user profile where to post things, such as photos and the updates of one's current status. Users are at liberty to like posts made on the friend's "Moments" page and attach comments. The principal selling points, in this case, is the improved privacy that enables one to do things, such as controlling, which of friends can see what a user comments on or likes. Lastly, since Facebook is forbidden in the People's Republic of China, a social media service, such as WeChat, fills the vacuum (Bhagat, 2016). Apparently, by offering a legitimate alternative to popular social media like Facebook, WeChat seems to fail-safe its asset as Chinese users attracted by the appeal of chief global social platforms may wish to use VPN if only to bypass the Great Firewall and create a Facebook account. Having a full alternative, they may be likelier to stick thereto, which may ensure WeChat can target a huge audience, without fearing that a part thereof is courted and hijacked by a media giant. Those who struggle to enjoy the joys of the alternative can make use of the acquaintance-finding feature.

4.3. WeChat, the Connecting Platform

While presenting the WeChat Shake feature, Bhagat (2016) stated that it was a very simple concept with far-reaching outcomes. If bored and lonely, a user can opt to meet a new WeChat buddy. To this end, one needs to go to the Discover tab, to tap the Shake button, and to begin shaking the phone. Once the feature identifies an individual to have activated the same buddy-finding feature, it sends the person a notification enabling chat initiation. Much

as this may seem strange to some extent in the west, it is a superb way for Chinese youngsters to meet new friends after leaving rural homes and heading to big megacities the caliber of Shenzhen and Shanghai (Bhagat, 2016). As appears, the feature spares WeChat users the need for engaging in a time-consuming quest for friends that is not certain to allow one to find friends. Scouring Facebook for potential friends may prove pointless, for there is no knowing if any person is keen on becoming a pen friend of a user's. If snubbed at an effort to approach an unfamiliar individual on a social platform, a user can feel rejected if not uninteresting and unappealing, which can evoke an inferiority complex and inflict a psycho-emotional trauma on one. By matching two individuals willing to share a chat together, WeChat averts the onset of frustration and other adverse effects of futile efforts to find acquaintances. If users do not feel like chatting to unfamiliar users, they can pick a game to play, without leaving their account.

4.4. WeChat, a Gaming Platform

Social media users may want to while away their time doing other than chatting with newfound buddies, WeChat can offer a decent gaming experience. Bhagat (2016) suggested that an integrated gaming platform was one of the most popular features of WeChat, which is unsurprising, since Tencent, the parent company of WeChat, is the world's biggest gaming company that has what it takes to bring gaming to the network in terms of the respective expertise. The users of the social platform can visit the in-app store if they wish to download games, launch ones from within the app, and proceed to make use of the built-in social features to add a more social dimension to the gaming experience. More importantly, these games are more than simple 2D-pixel art style titles. Some titles, such as Dragon Warriors and Thunder Raid, are completely fleshed out 3D experiences that resemble console games in the way of technical experience (Bhagat, 2016). If users do not find a WeChat game to their liking, they can buy one for their consoles or PCs using the payment feature of the platform.

4.5. WeChat, the Payment Platform

If willing to buy, WeChat users can do so, without leaving their favorite platform that has put them in a position to perform acquisitions whenever needed. As shown by Bhagat (2016), as from 2013, WeChat users came transferring money, sending monetary gifts on special occasions, and even paying bills through the integrated WeChat Pay feature. The messaging app enables users to pay for everything from a doctor's fees to utility bills (Bhagat, 2016). Users seemingly like the payment-related utility of WeChat as the social platform seems to be growing without a breach of continuity in terms of its payment service as Graziani (2018) showed that its application increase to twice its previous level in most situations presumably in 2015-2017, which is especially true of daily-life expenses, such as online shopping, food payments, and supermarket payments. An offline environment shaped by restaurants and supermarkets is the most popular application case for the payment feature. When it comes to online shopping, it is not far behind being utilized by 45,2% of users. Beyond the country, the platform has similarly experienced further growth. While in Japan, Chinese tourists are active in the

way of WeChat Payment use as the number of stores obtaining payments via the financial feature rose by 35 times in 2017 only (Graziani, 2018). WeChat seems to facilitate unconventional payments as well. Even if WeChat users should find themselves wanting to donate some money, they should be able to do so with ease. Graziani (2018) described the number of WeChat users donating to charities through the platform as having reached a high of 40,3% in 2017, which exceeds that from two years earlier twofold.

Age-wise, the penetration of the service feature is anything but even though. As shown by Graziani (2018), its penetration within the category of young consumers went from being 38% to becoming 97,3%. The comparable index for silver-haired users stood at 46,7% in 2017 having risen from 33,3% in 2015 (Graziani, 2018). The indicator rose the fastest in the young age cluster where it increased by two and a half times. In the older group, it rose by slightly more than one-third the previous level. Strange somewhat may be that the younger Chinese are the ones who waste little time embracing the payment option of the social platform, since it is they who are less well placed to spend and who are often cash-strapped not having a stable source of income that often comes with a job. Older residents have higher spending power; therefore, they should be expected to make more buying decisions. If so, they should be likelier to adopt the social platform's feature more quickly. Defy logic as this may, the contrasting pace of age group penetration can be rationalized. In all likelihood, younger residents may be more inclined to experiment. Conversely, older residents are likely more conservative. What they also are, are not technologically competent enough to be using social media. Rather than indicate their reluctance to test WeChat, the data possibly reflect the dearth of general enthusiasm to familiarize themselves with the technological product on the part of adults. These are the reasons why the older Chinese could have been slow to choose WeChat relative to the younger demographic group in the mentioned timeframe. While the platform does facilitate spending, it can help save funds too.

4.6. WeChat, Users' Thriftiness Enabler

According to Bhagat (2016), many a time do people go out for dinner during an outing with friends never to leave happy after. They are presented with a long, complicated bill with numerous counts of items, service charges, tax charges, and the like. Then, they need to split it up making sure they have the correct money denomination and amount, which is an exercise in frustration. The WeChat's Go Dutch feature bypasses this frustration by performing all the calculations for users and enabling them to pay what they exactly owe, through the app, to any of his/her contacts via the WeChat Pay feature (Bhagat, 2016). Whether users put the money saved into a business of their own or source funds from elsewhere, they can keep using WeChat even while running a business.

4.7. WeChat, the Business Assistant

The social network in question is increasingly becoming a business assistant in its own right and businesses are not shy of putting them to good use in some way or other. Graziani (2018) showed that WeChat mini-programs had seen the adoption rate rising critically. By the end of 2017, there had been

580,000 such programs created by 1 million developers, with 170 million daily active users drawn by mini-programs. They are richly applied, including by offline stores. Thus, for example, after adopting WeChat mini-programs, Yonghui Superstores had its users' digitization soar from 30% to 87%. Walk the Chat (2017) explained that WeChat mini-programs were sub-applications within the ecosystem of the social platform. What they enable is to offer advanced features to users, including but not limited to coupons, task management, and e-commerce (Walk the Chat, 2017).

As for other business-conducive features of the network, WeChat at work has reportedly gained 30 million active users from an estimated 1.5 million registered enterprises across 50 industries. Around 40% of businesses applied the accounts to provide customer service or services (Graziani, 2018). Businesses would not be using the platforms if it were not for their efficiency. Truly, Graziani (2018) revealed that WeChat Official Accounts have proved satisfactory to their operators, of whom 34% noted that the application of the accounts made it possible for them to cut costs by over 30%. Furthermore, 32% have sold products via accounts (Graziani, 2018). This success is far from surprising considering the nature of official accounts that the platform has to offer to businesses. Graziani (2017) explained that these accounts that were equivalent to Facebook pages were an interface a company could utilize in a variety of ways. To collect followers, to send them push notifications, and redirect them to a website/e-commerce is what businesses can do (Graziani, 2017). Thus, it seems that WeChat allows businesses to assemble its own audience online to communicate the brand message to them and alert them to new products via push notifications that will pop up inviting social media users to review updated offerings, which is why WeChat appears to be a potent promotional tool for businesses that go online. Its potency manifests itself easily in the mentioned sets of data reflecting the financial return on companies' investments in terms of time resources and marketing efforts.

There is one business-conducive feature that may deserve special attention. Businesses can avail themselves of the analytics tool of WeChat if they need to. Nanjing Marketing Group (2017) confirmed that the network had a built-in analytics platform that tracks the buying behavior and consumer interaction. Although it gives less information than Baidu Tongji and Google Analytics do, it breaks down important elements that may need to improve the strategy or content of the company to engage followers on a better level (as cited in Zhang, 2018). WeChat Analytics provides such features, as the amounts of likes and view of each post, Chinese province & city, although there is no geo-date for users beyond China, language, gender, user demographics, although these figures may lack reliability due to it being users who provide the input, and day-by-day date on the overall number of followers, whether canceled or otherwise. These data are filterable by source (Zhang, 2018). Given its benefits, whether auxiliary or otherwise, WeChat is unsurprisingly a social platform that competitors may believe needs replicating.

4.8. WeChat, a Solid Platform that Social Media Giants Want to Replicate

If there is something that can speak volumes for the utility of WeChat, it is the willingness of its biggest competitor to imitate its features. According to Bhagat (2016), Facebook sent waves across its audience in the weeks preceding the article's publication for the introduction of the feature enabling users to send money via Facebook Messenger. Given the feature regarded as a great innovation for the platform, Facebook was one step closer to consolidating its messenger as the ultimate lifestyle platform. In truth, WeChat has outpaced Facebook in this regard enabling payments through the app's WeChat Pay feature at least 3 years earlier, which was around 2013 (Bhagat, 2016). This is not the only feature that the US-based global market leader would like to have invented on its own, without needing to copy one from WeChat. Social Media China (2016) reported Facebook to be copying WeChat menus in efforts to enable users to converse with companies and public accounts. To provide some "suggested answers" to users, it registered 11,000 messenger bots. In general, Facebook is attempting to ramp up income from services rather than ads (Social Media China, 2016). WeChat is not flawless though despite being replicated by Facebook.

4.9. WeChat Cons or What Facebook Would not Want to Replicate

Despite having plenty of benefits to its name, WeChat is not flawless, yet some skepticism may relate to social media in general more than it does to the Chinese network. Kantar (2016) commented on the stance of people on social media like WeChat reporting that the number of people who regard social platforms as such that have a positive effect on their lives is on the decline. In 2016, it was 4% down from 2015. An estimated 15% share an understanding that their life got worse due to social media use, which marked a 2% increase in a single year over a comparable period. In China, the social media satisfaction score fell from 73,4% to 67% between 2014 and 2016 (as cited in Rong, 2016). It is understandable why people are none to happy as social media users. Although linking people who are hundreds of kilometers apart, these platforms replace the live conversation that paves the way for joint entertainment and traveling, which keeps the individual restricted to a single space, without much being seen, tasted, or felt outside the cyber world of social media. Thus, rather than being a fault of WeChat, the dissatisfaction with social media and its drivers are inevitable in the light of the nature of social media that often leaves users lacking live communication.

While WeChat can be associable with technical issues, it can be faultless as well. Aaron (2018) noted that WeChat users could encounter a number of resolvable issues, such as an account being unable to verify a user, which is a mandatory sign-in procedure, which may be down to a few reasons, one being that the verification code sent via SMS is provided very often, which may cause the user to overlook the latest one and apply the wrong code. At other times, the security app installed on the phone can get the code message blocked. If email is specified as a verification code recipient, a message can end up in the spam folder. Lastly, a possibility exists that the phone number or email address was entered wrongly (Aaron, 2018). For the user to apply an earlier code has nothing to do with WeChat, which is more of a sign of

inattentiveness, yet it may be said to be induced by the sign-in procedure requiring the use of verification messages. If a security app or email block or misdirect the code message or the correct email/phone details were not provided, WeChat does not seem responsible either, with the human factor and performance of nonrelated apps/services to blame, such as the email and antivirus.

At the same time, the social platform cannot be in a position to control whatever fraudulent activities occur that involve users' accounts, yet they do have place. Poh (2016) acknowledged that WeChat had become a breeding ground for escorts looking for their next client who may consent to the meeting proposal. Still, before meeting up, females may request of a male to purchase Alipay or iTunes credits and some do pay sometimes many times before getting to understand they are cheated out of cash. Sometimes, victims can be approached by a threatening male trying to get them to pay more via intimidation. Millions are already believed lost to the scheme. As for other cheating ways, WeChat users can stumble upon nude video extortionists. Men can have messages sent to them by appealing young women who make them believe they are irresistible and get them performing a striptease, which they record, only to demand a ransom for not posting the video on social platforms or pornography sites. One of the scammers caught turned out to be a 17-year-old who succeeded in forcing a victim to part with \$100,000 (Poh, 2016).

What WeChat also facilitates are sham marriages when foreigners propose to a victim and offer money as if to obtain a visa in doing so. Other victims can be matched with website scam asking to borrow a large amount of cash, inviting to partake in bogus investment, pleading for some monetary help claiming to have been hospitalized or kidnapped, or asking victims to pay the courier company money for a gift they send. The National Crime Prevention Council's Scam Alert website reported the loss of \$250,000 by a female victim (Poh, 2016). Other reports mention smaller figures as Tarmizi (2014) reported a case involving the loss of \$35,000 by a single mother aged 33 defrauded by a male Casanova who pretended to be a rich mining businessman from China who went on to fritter away RM30,000 of the victim's own money along with RM50,000 she had to borrow from loan sharks (Tarmizi, 2014). Not all episodes of the match-finding feature of WeChat end well as a report surfaced that a female had been ambushed and killed by a male stalking her via the "people nearby" feature, which he did in an attempt to rob the victim (Millward, 2018).

Instead of blocking the accounts of fraudsters or felons, the platform ends up terminating those of politically active users. Zhou (2018) stated that some WeChat users could find their accounts blocked permanently after they had done so little as incidentally mention some political issues while on the website. Speaking of mentioning the issues or otherwise showing disagreement, political dissidents along with other presumed offenders ought to beware of the possibility of judges being helped by WeChat keeping everything stored. Millward (2018) reported that some Chinese judges had begun using the text and photo-sharing features of the network in the course of trials. As for other notable disadvantages of WeChat, the status aspect seems poorly developed, as follows from Mahapatra (2013) who was critical of the network over its inability to equip the product with the indicators of users'

current status. For example, there is no “online” or “offline” status; nor is it easy to make out if the app has been removed from the phone of an individual user or if the user is still active (Mahapatra, 2013). Lastly, some users may struggle to make use of its services, including that, which finds a pen friend, since there is a language issue caused by the nature of the ethnic composition of the social platform’s users. Mahapatra (2013) confirmed the language barrier noting that the audience of WeChat was largely composed of Chinese users. Whether Chinese nationals will keep dominating the platform’s audience remains to be seen, so do other trends.

4.10. What Lies Ahead

The share of Facebook/Twitter users in corporate China may dwindle, while that of WeChat may rise, yet the odds of this happening remain to be identified. Dai (2019) reported Twitter and Facebook to have chosen to take down what they presumed to be Chinese-government-backed accounts, the idea being to curb the proliferation of disinformation on protests in Hong Kong, in a move that may earn the Western social media backlash in the Chinese market. Although blocked in the PRC by the Great Firewall, the two platforms are said to be garnering advertising income in the world’s second-biggest economy that comes from Chinese companies that are set to expand and penetrate foreign markets. Director at Shenzhen-based China Development Institute Liu Guohong opined that Chinese companies purchasing ads targeting the foreign audience would have to rethink their advertising ways now that the national interest is at stake (Dai, 2019). Chinese companies may have to reconsider their media partner and reconsider they most likely will, seeing that the government can force them into abandoning Facebook through repressive economic tools like tax or capital policies. The question that is waiting to be answered here is whether WeChat stands to gain from Chinese businesses being prohibited from using foreign competitors.

Then again, this is not to suggest that the share of WeChat consumers or revenue shaped thereby bids fair to expand as Chinese companies will need somewhere to advertise their products, for the coverage of the Chinese social platform seems rather geographically restricted in the sense that it has yet to come anywhere near reaching the application parity with top media the caliber of Facebook beyond mainland China. If not using Facebook that combines a multimillion audience of consumers, they may have no way of reaching their target audience. What is the good of using WeChat when non-Chinese users are not to be compared with Chinese peers in terms of their number? Therefore, the Chinese government’s foreign policy pursuits that can cost Chinese businesses the ability to access strong media will get WeChat operating in an alternative-free social media space to their financial detriment, which can backfire on the authorities whose soft power depends on budgetary arrivals, yet this is a different discourse matter.

It is highly unlikely for WeChat to grow a huge following in no time, whatever the utility of the platform. One the one hand, it could be regarded as an alternative to Facebook now often associated with spying as many reports feeding this perception can be circulating, including one by Saenz (2011) claiming the government to employ Facebook for spying on unsuspecting users whose private data may be reviewed by law enforcers. On the other hand,

Western users, for example, cannot be expected to switch over to WeChat whose link to the government is none the less, as may follow from Chen (2018) stating that many a millennial was abandoning WeChat over the lack of privacy and surveillance fears. While it is domestic users who fear lest they be spied on, foreign users should not be expected to rest easy as many are being paranoid, as confirmed by Wilson (2018) acknowledging there to be paranoid spying fears over the Chinese state in the West.

Then again, WeChat may fare well, without there being an increment in foreign users, inasmuch as the loss of some domestic ones may not make itself felt to the brand much. That millennials are heading towards the exit door is not good news for WeChat, for the youth is still the major demographical group of social platforms, yet this does not hold good for WeChat. Graziani (2018) demonstrated that older generations are more dependent on the platform. For users aged 60-plus, the network accounts for upwards of 50% of data use for 60% of users from this age cluster. By comparison, for users ages 18 and 35, WeChat is responsible for less than 30% of data use for around 50% of social platform users from this demographic category (Graziani, 2018). The aging of the nation seems to be playing into the hand of WeChat, seeing that it services older generations more than it does the youth. The Collective Responsibility (2016), which is a knowledge platform, offered an insight into the aging trend in China. The percentage of 60-plus Chinese has risen from around 7,5% to about 17,5%. As forecast, it will have risen to 38,5% by the mid-2050s (The Collective Responsibility, 2016).

Whatever the age group and the aging trend, there is a reason for each not to feel discouraged by surveillance concerns. Describing plenty of residents as inspired by loyalty, Thomas (2019) explained that at the root of such allegiance are the accomplishments of the government. They come on the shape of the growth of the economy at the median rate of 9,5% and a colossal increase in GDP per capita from \$307 to \$7,755 since reform and opening in 1978 (Thomas, 2019). If paired with positive growth and, seemingly, the collateral benefits thereof, such as personal welfare improvement, the government will evoke more positive emotions, with spying concerns likely being unable to lead people to grow disillusioned. The Chinese have it in them to declare loyalty to the ruling elite as a nation that, according to Hofstede Insights (2019), scores high on power distance, the score being 80, which, as Elvira and Dávila (2005) explained meant that the local society was more collectivist. This means that its members are reliant on authority figures (Elvira and Dávila, 2005), obedient (Killen, 2013), and compliant with authorities (Usunier, Van Herk, and Lee, 2017). This compliance is characteristic of vertical collectivist societies (Usunier, Van Herk, and Lee, 2017), such as China (Wels, 2002).

Although there can be no convincing some, it is unlikely that there will be any significant drain from WeChat, for China keeps major competitors blocked and gets VPN users punished. Summers (2019) showed that it was like the Chinese government to shut down the cell phone service of VPN users. It applies the measure to whomever they please, be they natives or foreign nationals, only for the individual to go through an annoying bureaucratic unblocking procedure involving law enforcers (Summers, 2019). This example alone goes to show that, by punishing the users of VPN that allows bypassing

the ban and using Facebook, the government discourages the use of non-domestic media and gives an additional commercial impetus to WeChat and similar home social platforms. The most hardcore rebels in the camp of social media users not swayed by shutdowns or other measures should know better than to trade superior utility for perceived privacy benefits if none of the social platforms guarantees one. Besides, one can keep his/her account private by doing so little as making correct choices in settings. Even if these residents do not come to understand this privacy lifehack, the government can theoretically disperse their doubts. Considering the important role played by WeChat in the economy of China, it may be that the government will reconsider its intrusive influence and stop short of utilizing it for surveillance if it does do so. If so, the platform should ramp up its following along with the revenue that comes with users and consumers' presence online.

On the negative side, the platform has as good as overgrown the region where it was born and where it secures the best part of its income. Graziani (2018) showed that the network has mostly bled dry its growth potential in the People's Republic. A further piece of evidence was produced to support the claim, with it being said that WeChat had in excess of 1 billion monthly active users (Graziani, 2018). It does not seem to have any room for growth, since the remaining population cannot be converted into active users for a variety of reasons. Some are too poor to afford a personal computer or more portable devices like cell phones or smartphones; others are too young to use social platforms; others are too ill; thus, they cannot so much as move, even less use WeChat and its features. These groups of Chinese residents cannot be used to extend the current user audience of WeChat. The young age group may be worth using the better to visualize the exhausted state of the social media audience.

PopulationPyramid.net (2019) estimated the percentage of children aged between 0 and 4 at 3,1% and 2,7% of boys and girls respectively, which is otherwise equivalent to around 43 and 37,3 million male and female children. Overall, the population of China is close to 1,4 billion people (PopulationPyramid.net, 2019). This means that slightly less than a quarter of the 400-million population of non-active users largely cannot be targeted as they are still to come of age to use the platform. It is not that those aged 5 to 9 are a potential category to work with as children may gradually embrace the world of social media rather than plunge into it, immediately they gain writing and communication types of competence that are not fully mastered until children turning 7 most likely. Bruce (2019) confirmed this stating that 6-7 is the age period, during which writing and reading are taught. Most countries around the world favor this age period (Bruce, 2019). Absent reading and writing competencies alone, children may struggle to use social platforms; therefore, over 90 million of the Chinese under 4 can be joined by a large share of those from the 5-9 age cluster in the group of residents that WeChat cannot target, which further reinforces its domestic expansion limitedness and shows that it would be better off expanding internationally if it is to keep growing. This, however, may be feasible if the government of China behaves itself in a way that does not breed suspicions on the part of foreign consumers of Chinese products being used by the government of the PRC in an unethical fashion, such as surveillance performance.

5. Conclusion

Thus, WeChat is a social platform that has garnered over one billion users despite not being in the market for as long as major social media have. This result it has achieved by introducing new features like a “find nearby users” function and laying the platform accessible to a broader audience through the diversification of the range of usable languages. While it is nowhere near matching its principal competitor, the Facebook Inc., sitting fifth on the list of top social media in part due to its yet-poor foreign market penetration relative to key rivals, WeChat has what it takes to expand its current audience that cannot but fall for its characteristics, including the WeChat Shake feature finding a match for those who have no one to talk to presently, a gaming platform, an integrated WeChat Pay feature enabling all manner of payments, the WeChat's Go Dutch feature that performs all calculations needed to ensure a user is not left out of pocket, and a built-in analytics platform that helps businesses understand its consumer base. All of these features allow WeChat to position itself as a worthy equivalent of Facebook that is especially welcome in the social media landscape deprived of competition by the censorious government.

The platform has been successful, such that Facebook appears eager to replicate its features, including its menus and the money transfer feature. If it were not a proper alternative with much to offer, WeChat would not be copied in some ways by Facebook any more than there would be a multi-million user base. Still, WeChat is not flawless and the most notable fallouts include the use of the text and photo-sharing features by judges, the lack of users' status information, and a language barrier that, however, are solvable. The barrier issue, for example, may be solved if the platform does go global diversifying its audience, which will enable it to match users with an identical linguistic background. As for what is to come, WeChat is much immune from the aging problem, for its audience tends to be older. Still, if it is to grow, its needs to move beyond the PRC, since it cannot transform the share of the population not using WeChat into active users due to their age, health, and other characteristics that deduct from the willingness and/or ability of the non-user cluster to employ WeChat and its services that may sometimes require the availability of funds, as is the case with the payment feature. Foreign growth, however, depends much on how the government behaves itself in geopolitical terms, which contributes much to the perception of the nation and its products and shapes the WeChat usage willingness accordingly. Put otherwise, the current spying and intellectual property theft paranoia shaped by actual precedents is unlikely to increase the number of WeChat enthusiasts abroad; therefore, if the Chinese government mends its ways, WeChat may stand to gain from a renewed interest in the Chinese social media product.

6. References

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