WeChat Mobile Library Service in Chinese Academic Libraries:
A Case Study of Shanghai University

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the WeChat mobile library service programme at Shanghai University Library and identifies problems and resolutions by reviewing the development process and experience and user feedback. A case study was conducted, and user feedback from a web survey was analysed to identify the programme's problems. Accordingly, recommendations and resolutions were developed. The author discovers that a WeChat account is crucial as an interaction platform between libraries and patrons, particularly on mobile devices. Patrons prefer to receive library services via WeChat rather than other channels. Their favourite features include online public access catalogue (OPAC), my library, and study facility availability. Libraries should conduct regular assessments to understand patrons' feedback or requests and make timely adjustments accordingly. The web survey and its data are novel in this area and provide a credible example to optimize WeChat library services.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an important part of daily life for people across the world, especially millennials. It has become a common platform for users to exchange information and share their experiences and ideas. By January 2015, there were 2.078 billion active social media accounts for 7.2 billion people around the world. Among these accounts, 1.685 billion were active mobile social accounts. As mobile-oriented services such as WhatsApp, WeChat, and Facebook Messenger are the most popular social media platforms in some economies, it is clear that much of our digital behaviour is now converging around mobile devices (*Kemp, 2015*).

In China, WeChat (Weixin in Chinese) (2017) and Weibo/Microblog are the two major social media platforms, with communication features similar to WhatsApp, LINE, Twitter, and Facebook. It is noteworthy that WeChat has already become the No.1 social media platform in China since 2011.

The WeChat mobile application was released by Tencent (2017), a leading high-tech Chinese company, in January 2011. WeChat had soon become the most popular Social Networking Site (SNS) application with more than 846 million active users in China, as of the third quarter of 2016. Meanwhile, having integrated many other functions especially payment, purchase and games, WeChat has evolved into a "must-have" app for most Chinese mobile phone users. Weibo (Microblog in English), the previous dominant SNS in China before 2011 with similar functions as Facebook and Twitter, had only 297 million active users as of the third quarter of 2016 (*CIW Team, 2016*).

WeChat is free to install, use and download, and it supports all smartphone platforms and Windows Phone operating systems. It has become a global social media platform with more than 70 million overseas users, available in over 200 countries and supported over 20 languages.

WeChat users can engage in social communication with a reduced cost of admission (*Zhang, 2017*). However, WeChat is more than a mere person-to-person messaging platform. In the beginning, WeChat was just a social media app developed for mobile devices, but it soon became a comprehensive platform integrating many features such as public account, news feed, online payment and a portal to host other applications. Individuals or institutions can create a public account to provide news and other contents. Using Application Programme Interfaces (APIs) and services provided by WeChat, public account owners can develop custom features for their account as their marketing tools. Users can subscribe to these accounts, receive news, write comments and even participate in more complicated interactive online activities.

Compared with other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and LINE, WeChat has many unique advantages in China because of its availability, free and open API and low cost of secondary development. Not only can people exchange information, but also complete business transactions. Previously, Twitter opening its API was a unique feature that initially allowed a host of other developers to secure their own clients. However, Twitter has now closed off access to its API (*Fernandez, 2016*). Likewise, although Facebook's Instant Articles service allows publishers to host their content on Facebook's servers, allowing publishers to load content faster and work within Facebook's mobile environment, the service is currently unavailable in China because of Internet censorship.

Thus, WeChat offers an alternative way to extend the outreach for Chinese academic libraries. As it has so much unique strengths and can make library users gain a more comfortable experience, more and more Chinese academic libraries have begun to launch WeChat.

This paper will review the development process of the WeChat mobile service programme at Shanghai University (SHU) Library, and provide an empirical case of the library patrons' preference to receive library services via WeChat. A web user survey offers evidence and leads to suggestions for its further development. The author concludes that WeChat not only can help the library to disseminate information but is also a good platform for two-way communication with patrons. It is a powerful tool for the library to attract patrons in the current mobile environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nowadays many libraries promote their collections and services to the digital-native generation via social media. Cuddy et al. (2010) introduced the application of Twitter at the NYU Health Sciences Libraries as an outreach tool for marketing.

Facebook is also widely used by libraries for community building and providing static links to library resources, whereas Twitter is used for communicating with individuals and publishing timely updates about new resources and current events (*Palmer, 2014*).

Chan (2012) investigated the relative effectiveness of different forms of social media advertising in promoting the collections and services of academic libraries at the Hong Kong Baptist University. Chan claimed that social network advertising had the potential to be a cost-effective means of marketing for academic libraries. Moreover, Chan found that advertising strategies that drew on the social features of Facebook were more effective than traditional approaches.

Saw et al. (2012) pointed out that more than half of international and domestic students use social media for sharing and finding information. Their survey results strongly suggested that libraries needed to further exploit the strengths of different SNS. She thought SNS was an important platform for participation and collaboration to disseminate information and facilitate engagement, and, ultimately, build better relationships with students.

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