

# Why Is One Social Media Platform Not Enough? A Typology of Platform-Swinging Behavior and Associated Affordance Preferences

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## Abstract

This study seeks to advance the scholarship on the phenomenon of social media platform-swinging in the context of the polymedia environment in China. Specifically, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of uses and gratifications and channel complementarity theory, we propose that the platform-swinging behavior is driven by users' various complementary and supplementary needs. Drawing on 32 semi-structured interviews, we identify four distinct types of platform-swinging behavior: social connecting, impression managing, information seeking, and aimless swinging. We further reveal that, depending on various complementary and supplementary needs, each type of platform-swinging behavior has distinct media affordance preferences. By profiling the distinct platform-swinging behaviors and examining their preferred affordances, the study advances our theoretical understanding of the dynamics between the polymedia ecology and users' gratifications.

## Keywords

platform-swinging, polymedia, affordances, uses and gratification, channel complementarity theory

The proliferation of social media has brought us an unprecedented era of hyper-connectivity, substantially changing the way people communicate and live. Up until 2022, the number of social media users has reached 4.62 billion around the world (Hootsuite, 2022). In China, this number has skyrocketed to 1.03 billion until January 2023, which accounts for 72% of China's total population. On average, each Chinese user holds accounts on 7.3 social media platforms and spends 2.5 hours daily on various platforms (We Are Social, 2023, Slide 50). With the diversifying ecosystem of social media, there has been an observed tendency toward technical homogeneity among seemingly divergent platforms, either through synthesis (e.g., Facebook's adoption of Snapchat's specific features) or acquisition (e.g., Facebook's acquisition of Instagram) (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2023). This raises the question of why, despite such homogeneity, more and more users are not satisfied with constraining their activities within a single platform and thereby choose to maintain active profiles on multiple ones, exploiting a conglomeration of tools and functions from these platforms in a synchronized manner.

Scholars have called for research attention to this emerging social media behavior as well as the interrelatedness among platforms to better understand the current social media ecology and complexity of media choices (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2021). Tandoc and his colleagues represent the early scholars looking into this phenomenon and use the term

"platform-swinging" when conceptualizing this cross-platform media use behavior (Tandoc et al., 2019). They refer to platform-swinging as the behavior of using more than one social media platform in a routine manner instead of switching from one platform and abandoning another (Tandoc et al., 2019).

A burgeoning body of research has been devoted to understanding this emerging behavior, with particular attention paid to its determinants, including sociodemographic factors (Matassi et al., 2022), gratifications (Tandoc et al., 2019), and temporal management (Boczkowski et al., 2018). In spite of the encouraging findings, the current body of literature on platform-swinging has primarily focused on a general level of analysis, which has led to a lack of nuanced understanding. Thus, the primary aim of our research is to enhance the comprehension of platform-swinging by introducing a typology that classifies this behavior based on an examination of the motivations and needs of users. Moreover, to gain a deeper understanding of this behavior, we investigate the specific affordances that individuals with each type

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of platform-swinging behavior are seeking and how various affordances navigate the platform-swinging practice. To this end, we interviewed 32 Chinese residents during the pandemic lockdown and examined specific social media affordances preferred by different types of platform-swinging behavior. By doing so, this study may advance our understanding of the relationship between media ecology and users' behavior from a higher-level perspective.

Two important considerations merit attention for the implementation of this study in China. First, China has created a digital environment wherein domestic platforms hold a predominant position. In particular, WeChat stands out as an all-encompassing platform integrating diverse functionalities, ranging from messaging and social networking to e-commerce and financial services. Nevertheless, while its all-in-one nature offers unparalleled convenience, people may still exhibit platform-swinging behavior (Pang, 2018; Z. Wang, 2023). This intriguing paradox compelled our investigation of this phenomenon within the Chinese media landscape. Second, the rigorous COVID-19 lockdown measures implemented in China may also accentuate people's engagement in platform-swinging. As Madianou (2021) noted, the pandemic has brought a phase of "polymedia life" for millions, wherein people exhibited a heightened dependency on communication technologies for almost all aspects of social life. The convergence of diverse needs during the lockdown, such as social interaction, professional networking, and recreational activities within a single platform (Yue et al., 2023) may pose challenges in effectively managing and segregating different facets of one's online presence. In this light, we argue that Chinese users may engage in platform-swinging as a way to establish and uphold a clear distinction between personal and professional connections or between leisure and work-related content. We sought to understand platform-swinging behavior within the Chinese media environment during this special time and further explore the implications brought by these contextual factors.

## The Polymedia Environment

Polymedia was proposed as a theoretical concept to describe the emerging media environment as an "integrated structure" that provides users with proliferating communication opportunities (Madianou, 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2013a, 2013b). Under this conceptual umbrella, each individual platform is noted to be a part of a network of knitted affordances rather than discrete technologies (Madianou & Miller, 2013b). Facing the unprecedented proliferation of media options and ever-increasing content in the environment, users often selectively choose a manageable set of channels and sources as their social media repertoires (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Horvát & Hargittai, 2021; Matassi et al., 2022). Users may choose different media forms (e.g., text, picture, voice, video) and content (e.g., hedonic, eudaimonic) based on their needs in communication (Horvát & Hargittai, 2021),

relationships (Boczkowski et al., 2018), and information (Taneja et al., 2012). In this light, the repertoire approach views media users as proactive agents who make informed decisions about media use according to their preferences and interests.

As Madianou (2014) argued, people's navigation in polymedia involves a complex interplay of social, cultural, and personal factors rather than solely technical factors of media (Madianou & Miller, 2013a, 2013b; Miller et al., 2019). Therefore, it is essential to examine individuals' media practices in polymedia from a holistic perspective that considers their broader connections to social systems.

In this study, it is imperative to discuss the distinctive contextual characteristics of the Chinese media landscape, with a particular emphasis on the prominent role played by WeChat. WeChat is often regarded as a polymedia environment for its broad spectrum of features and functions, including messaging, news feed access, short video and gaming functions, and e-commerce capabilities. Each of these functionalities can be perceived as an independent platform within the WeChat ecosystem. WeChat not only provides a multifaceted media environment for information exchange but also caters to users' practical life needs across various domains (Xiong & Liu, 2023). Consequently, WeChat emerges as a comprehensive polymedia ecosystem that intricately integrates into most, if not all, aspects of users' daily lives. Chen et al. (2018) even used the term "super-sticky" to describe users' heavy reliance on this versatile and multi-functional "polymedia" platform. However, notwithstanding the extensive suite of features and functions offered by WeChat, a pertinent question arises: Why do individuals still engage in platform-swinging behavior and habitat on many other platforms?

## Platform-Swinging

Platform-swinging is defined as the behavior of "using more than one social media platform and routinely rotating among these platforms" (Tandoc et al., 2019, p. 21). Similar yet distinct concepts include media multitasking (i.e., multiple exposures to two or more media forms at a single point in time; see Bardhi et al., 2010), media multiplexing (i.e., continuous consumption of multiple media types like television, the internet, and print in a short period; see Lin et al., 2013), and media switching (i.e., switching from one form of media to another to adapt to the actual context they face; see Gershon, 2010a). Unlike those behaviors dealing with users' limited media contact and attention as well as the potential for abandoning behavior in the multimedia context, platform-swinging entails the synchronous use and management of multiple platforms as a habitual and chronic behavior.

A burgeoning number of studies have been conducted to understand this behavior in various contexts and its associated gratifications. For example, in the initial qualitative study conceptualizing this behavior, Tandoc et al. (2019)

identified self-presentation and relationship management as the two primary gratifications fulfilled by platform-swinging. Research in marketing also found that customers engage in brand community-swinging for different values like information and social interaction (Liao et al., 2021). Another qualitative study suggested that platform-swinging is affected by users' perceptions toward the platform, such as perceived anonymity, perceived privacy riskiness, and so on (Song & Yu, 2022). Nevertheless, prior research on platform-swinging has typically treated this behavior as a one-dimensional construct without examining the intricacies and subtleties inherent in this behavior. This study thereby seeks to advance the understanding of this behavior by exploring different types of platform-swinging behavior. In doing so, we aim to tap into the essence of this behavior to explain why people engage in rotations among the platforms chronically.

Our investigation is primarily guided by two theoretical frameworks: uses and gratifications (U&G) and channel complementarity theory (CCT). U&G is a well-established framework to understand media use from the audience perspective (Katz et al., 1973; Quan-Haase & Young, 2014). It argues that people are proactive users who can make conscious media choices based on different needs and interests (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Recently, this framework has been extensively used to explain people's social media use and motivations (Ruggiero, 2000). For example, it was found that the primary motive for Twitter use is information acquisition, whereas Instagram is often thought of as a place for self-exhibition (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). In this light, we argue that one possible motivation for platform-swinging is to seek a supplementarity in the observation of the distinct positions and functions provided by each platform.

Taking one step further, CCT represents another theory explaining how users navigate through their social media repertoires and explicating the relationships between the chosen platforms (Dutta-Bergman, 2004a, 2004b, 2006). Later, it was extended to explain people's new media practices. Along with the U&G model and niche theory, CCT postulates that the use of a particular medium to gather information in one particular area should be associated with the use of other media to fulfill the information need in the same area (Dutta-Bergman, 2004a, 2004b). Abundant evidence supporting the CCT has been accumulated across different areas like interpersonal communication (Dutta-Bergman, 2004b; Ruppel et al., 2018), community participation (Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Liao et al., 2021), and news seeking (Dutta-Bergman, 2004a; Rains & Ruppel, 2016; Ruppel & Rains, 2012). Taken together, the essence of CCT lies in the argument that platforms are interdependent and interconnected in the sense that the use of one platform is tied to the use of another (Rains & Ruppel, 2016; Ruppel & Rains, 2012). Following this line, we propose that seeking complementarity represents another possible motivation for explaining the platform-swinging behavior.

Based on this review, we expect that individuals' platform-swinging is motivated by needs in two dimensions: complementary and supplementary needs. However, due to a lack of sufficient related prior studies, we delve into this issue by proposing the following research question instead of a concrete hypothesis.

**Research Question 1:** What are the major types of social media platform-swinging behavior?

## Affordances and Platform-Swinging

The second goal of this study is to understand whether and how individuals exhibiting each type of platform-swinging behavior exploit various affordances embedded in the polymedia environment to fulfill their needs. The concept of affordance was initially proposed to theorize the environmental provisions for species such as shelter and food (Gibson, 1979). Later, it found application in design studies, serving as a cornerstone in guiding artifacts (e.g., Norman, 2007) and technology design (Hutchby, 2001). Social media studies have employed it as a theoretical lens to study the interplay between human actions and technological possibilities (e.g., Treem & Leonardi, 2013).

Among the plethora of definitions proffered by various disciplines (e.g., see Fernández-Ardèvol et al., 2022 for definitions in the management field; see Zammuto et al., 2007 for definitions in the IT design community), we adopted the one that is specifically developed for social media.<sup>1</sup> This definition posits affordance as "the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms" (Ronzhyn et al., 2023, p. 12). In this definition, three notable characteristics of social media affordances are underscored: relational (Gibson, 1979), perceptual (Norman, 2007), and contextual (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Specifically, the relational nature implies that the affordances derive from dynamic interactions between users and technologies; the perceptual aspect emphasizes that affordances are tied to users' thoughts, needs, and capabilities (Islam et al., 2020); and the contextual nature means that the use of technology is heavily shaped or even constrained by the cultural and social properties of the users (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021). Adopting the affordance lens and the aforementioned conceptualization, we posit that platform-swinging behaviors may strategically depend on and capitalize on the various affordances provided by each platform to fulfill their social, cultural, and contextual needs.

To better understand the diverse affordances within the media environment, scholars have proposed a multilayered approach, arguing that affordances exist at various levels of abstraction and specificity (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). One notable conceptualization is by Bucher and Helmond (2018), who delineated affordances into abstract high-level and more concrete

low-level categories. High-level affordances encompass the overarching dynamics and vibes facilitated by media and platforms, within which various feature-oriented low-level affordances may be nested.

In this study, we embraced a broad taxonomy put forth by Treem and Leonardi (2013)<sup>2</sup> which posited that we should “transcend the particularities of any technology or its features, and focus on communicative outcomes” (p. 147). They identify association, editability, visibility, and persistence as the four pivotal affordances shaping social media communication. Specifically, association refers to the constructed connections between individuals (supporting social connections) or between individuals and content (accessing relevant information) (O’Riordan et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2017; Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Editability pertains to users’ capacity to craft and modify communication acts, with the support of the asynchronicity of computer-mediated communication, before their dissemination or for individuals to modify or review content that they have already transmitted (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Visibility is related to the amount of effort required to locate and access relevant information (Treem & Leonardi, 2013), as well as the knowledge of what other people and/or groups are aware of (Leonardi, 2014). Finally, persistence denotes the propensity for social media to perpetuate a record of communication (Fox & McEwan, 2017) such that online expressions, along with other types of data, endure and remain accessible to users rather than expiring or vanishing (Treem & Leonardi, 2013).

Furthermore, social media practices are influenced by the specific affordances nested within platforms. Specifically, an association between individuals is achieved through lower-level affordances of social connectivity (e.g., reciprocal and following) and social interactivity (e.g., comments and instant messaging) (O’Riordan et al., 2012). The degree of visibility is realized on platforms through more specific lower-level affordances like searchability (Rice et al., 2017), algorithmic recommendation, and privacy (Fox & McEwan, 2017). Persistence has a strong relationship with two lower-level affordances, namely, accessibility (the user needs to be able to access it) and immutability (it should be the same message) (Ronzyn et al., 2023). In addition, different social media affordances create a strong sense of connection between people and the social presence of others (Fox & McEwan, 2017). In this study, we adopt this taxonomy as the overarching framework to investigate the specific affordances sought by each type of platform-swinging behavior to fulfill their respective needs.

**Research Question 2:** What specific affordances does each type of platform-swinging behavior seek to fulfill?

## Method

### Interviewees

We targeted social media users who used more than one platform in a routine manner. Recruitment was accomplished

through a combination of online recruitment and snowball sampling. The sample consisted of 32 Chinese social media users, 17 of whom were female and 15 of whom were male, with ages ranging from 18 to 34. See Table 1 for descriptive information on all interviewees.

### Procedure

During the COVID-19 pandemic, 27 interviewees were interviewed using WeChat video or voice calls, and five interviewees were interviewed using face-to-face interactions. They were first presented with a consent form and asked for approval. The interviews began with a general introduction to social media, and interviewees were asked to reflect on their daily social media experience. Subsequently, the interviewees were asked to discuss their behavior with respect to swinging between different platforms and what factors influence their swinging behavior. Sample questions included an inquiry into the reasons for using multiple platforms despite their similar functionalities and interviewees’ perspectives on the platform’s atmosphere and community culture. The duration of the interviews ranged between 30 and 90 min.

### Data Analysis

We employed a three-step coding method, consistent with grounded theory research, to analyze the interview data. This method includes open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Creswell & Poth, 2016). During open coding, the first step, we broke down the data and identified key concepts and phrases, grouping them into subcategories. We clustered the subcategories with a repetition frequency greater than three times into categories according to the relationship between similarity and causality (Noble & Mitchell, 2016). We then explored the relationships between subcategories and categories to express the organic relationship between various parts of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This led to the compilation of open codes into axial codes and the final selection, comparison, and identification of categories.

## Results

Our findings indicated that users tended to swing between various social media platforms, leveraging their distinctive affordances to satisfy their needs. The majority of interviewees maintained active accounts on at least three platforms, with a maximum of nine. WeChat was used by all interviewees, while Weibo and QQ were also widely adopted, followed by TikTok, Bilibili, Zhihu, Xiaohongshu, and Douban. A number of other platforms, such as Toutiao, Blued, Hupu, Yinghuo Quan, TapTap, Dingding, and Soul, were also mentioned by at least one participant.

In addition, it was found that platform-swinging behavior was driven by the diversity of supplementary and

**Table 1.** Descriptive data for interviewees.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Education level	Occupation
Interviewee 1	Male	29	Doctor	Forestry profession
Interviewee 2	Female	26	Master	Blogger
Interviewee 3	Male	28	Doctor	Financial profession
Interviewee 4	Female	25	Master	Student
Interviewee 5	Female	21	Bachelor	Student
Interviewee 6	Female	23	Master	Student
Interviewee 7	Female	25	Master	Student
Interviewee 8	Female	23	Master	Student
Interviewee 9	Male	28	Doctor	Student
Interviewee 10	Male	26	Doctor	Student
Interviewee 11	Male	19	Bachelor	Student
Interviewee 12	Male	22	Bachelor	Energy profession
Interviewee 13	Male	23	Bachelor	Student
Interviewee 14	Male	26	Master	Medical profession
Interviewee 15	Male	19	Bachelor	Student
Interviewee 16	Female	20	Bachelor	Student
Interviewee 17	Male	23	Bachelor	Student
Interviewee 18	Female	26	Doctor	Student
Interviewee 19	Male	21	Bachelor	Student
Interviewee 20	Male	23	Doctor	Student
Interviewee 21	Female	28	Doctor	Student
Interviewee 22	Female	29	Master	Student
Interviewee 23	Female	23	Master	Student
Interviewee 24	Female	23	Master	Student
Interviewee 25	Female	30	Doctor	Student
Interviewee 26	Female	18	High school graduate	Student
Interviewee 27	Female	30	Bachelor	Government official
Interviewee 28	Female	29	Master	Academic profession
Interviewee 29	Male	35	Doctor	Academic profession
Interviewee 30	Female	30	Master	Financial staff
Interviewee 31	Male	34	Master	Engineering director
Interviewee 32	Male	30	Bachelor	Judicial profession

complementary needs. The variations in needs were found to give rise to four distinct behaviors, which we have labeled as social connecting, impression managing, information seeking, and aimless swinging (as illustrated in Figure 1). In the following section, we provide a detailed description of each type as well as responses from the interviewees for illustration purposes.

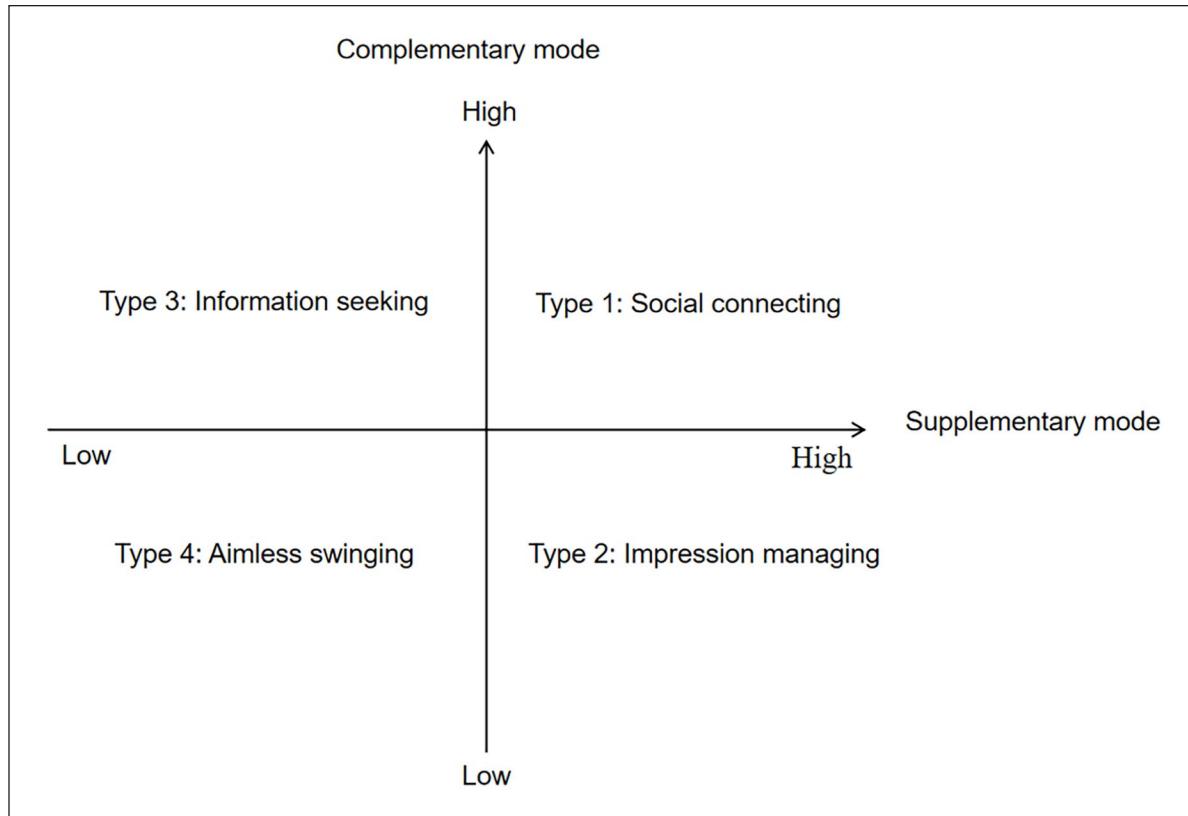
### Social Connecting

Individuals with platform-swinging behavior for social connecting displayed a propensity for satisfying both supplementary and complementary needs. They skillfully took advantage of the differences among platforms to contact different relationships and simultaneously monitor individuals of interest across multiple platforms to satisfy their supplementary social connection needs. As an example, individuals commonly employed WeChat for communicating with family and friends while simultaneously using Weibo and TikTok

to follow the activities of notable personalities and influencers they admired.

“WeChat makes it easier to connect with your family and friends without the need for costly short message service. It is primarily designed for maintaining social relationships, while platforms like Weibo and Instagram allow users to see content from prominent figures” (Interviewee 7).

They diligently utilized various platforms to connect with the same group of people to satisfy their complementary social connection needs. They were motivated to stay informed about the lives of others by actively navigating between multiple platforms. These individuals tended to establish and nurture extensive networks of friends on various platforms. By platform-swinging, they could keep abreast of the latest news and updates from their connections and maintain a sense of social connectedness and belonging.



**Figure 1.** How the different platform-swinging behaviors link to the complementary mode and supplementary mode.

“Despite being WeChat friends, some of my friends and I still follow each other on Weibo because I wanted to know what my friends were doing when they weren’t chatting on WeChat” (Interviewee 25).

The affordance of association emerged as the preeminent aspect frequently mentioned by social connectors. Our findings indicated that a fundamental need for social connectors was the capacity to effectively connect with different relationships. Furthermore, the social benefits of platform-swinging included building social connections through the feature-level affordance of social connectivity as well as maintaining intimate relationships through the feature-level affordance of social interactivity.

“A gay man who wants to make new friends with people who have the same sexual preferences has to swing to Blued. There is no other choice” (Interviewee 14).

“You don’t want to send instant messages to people you haven’t been in touch with for a long time, but if you’re liking and commenting on each other on WeChat Moments, it’s communicating a signal that we’re still connected friends. It just conveys a psychological feeling that social media facilitates interaction, makes me feel less alone, and gives me some support” (Interviewee 5).

### ***Impression Managing***

People who fulfilled impression-managing needs by platform-swinging exhibited high supplementary needs and low complementary needs. Their self-presentation activities were often driven by supplementary needs owing to the divergent composition and scope of their intended audiences, while limited complementary needs were evidenced by their infrequent cross-posting of the same content across different platforms. They achieved this goal with the support of visibility affordance and privacy affordance at a lower level.

Our observations revealed that the predominant role of WeChat has created a comprehensive ecology intricately interweaving personal, professional, familial, and even tenuously connected individuals within one singular space, which may potentially give rise to “context collapse” (Boyd, 2008). As Boyd (2008) noted, presenting a verifiable, singular identity to diverse groups of audiences has become inherently challenging. In this light, the holistic and all-encompassing nature of WeChat may not inherently foster sustained user engagement within this singular platform. Rather, it may unexpectedly give rise to platform-swinging, wherein users gravitate toward diverse platforms to establish more segmented environments and exert greater control over content visibility. This approach can help mitigate the risk of context collapse and cultivate a sense of customized online identity.

As for WeChat Moments, users set limits on their posts to content that was suitable for all audiences, presented themselves in a socially desirable manner, or refrained from posting any content.

"Because my WeChat contact list includes a diverse mix of individuals, including leaders, teachers, classmates, friends, and even strangers. I try to avoid posting content that everyone can see, as it may not be suitable for everyone on my list" (Interviewee 14).

In addition, rooted in the intrinsic values of collectivism and harmony prevalent in Chinese society, we found that our interviewees frequently navigated multiple platforms to strategically opt for platforms that aligned with their social circles and interests rather than freely expressing themselves in a potentially discordant environment. In this context, platform-swinging emerged as a nuanced strategy to curate online experiences, aiming to ensure harmonious interactions and minimize the likelihood of encountering dissenting viewpoints.

"I have stopped using WeChat Moments to share updates. Previously, I used to post about every romantic relationship I had. However, despite sharing these experiences, they often ended in failure. I feel uncomfortable when people ask me why I've changed partners again. Therefore, by refraining from posting, I hope to reduce some of that awkwardness" (Interviewee 24).

Particularly noteworthy among our interviewees was their expressed need for a platform that allowed free expression, often achieved through platform-swinging. Our interviewees exhibited increasing conscientiousness and intentionality in shaping their online personas. We found female interviewees were more likely than males to utilize platform-swinging for impression-managing purposes. Also, individuals transitioning into the workforce demonstrated a higher inclination to selectively hide certain aspects of their identity compared to their peers in student roles. These findings may be due to societal norms and expectations regarding gender and social class in Chinese media discourse. For example, given China's media landscape, women may feel more pressure to conform to beauty standards and display an idealized version of themselves online (Shao, 2023; Zhang, 2012). People in the middle class are encouraged to prioritize professional achievements or social positions as they navigate the responsibilities and expectations associated with adulthood and professional life (Peng, 2019). As a result, individuals resorted to platform-swinging to navigate and negotiate these societal expectations.

"Although there are male users on Xiaohongshu, it is primarily a community designed for women to share product recommendations. It focuses on fashion and beauty, beauty culture, and the development of a refined woman, so I know I have to post something like that to get attention and traffic" (Interviewee 2).

As Tagg and Lyons (2021) suggested, the core of polymedia theory is the recognition that media choices are

inherently ideological and cultural. Our interviewees also expressed that their propensity for platform-swinging was heavily influenced by the perceived meanings and normative standards associated with each platform (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Within this framework, the selection of a platform as a "tree hole" (树洞 in Chinese) depended on the users' perceived media ideologies and cultures (Fernández-Ardèvol et al., 2022; Gershon, 2010a, 2010b), as well as its suitability (Ben Elul, 2021; Waterloo et al., 2018). They employed a calculated approach to online self-presentation that aligned with both the platform's norms and their audience's preferences. Weibo, for instance, has emerged as a preferred platform for emotional expression, where users engage in authentic self-presentation. Conversely, platforms like Douban and Xiaohongshu were selected as "tree holes" only when users perceived them as suitable for self-expression.

"If I have a lot of negative emotions, I avoid posting them on Moments because I don't want others to perceive me as a negative person. Instead, I will post it freely on Weibo, although I know there will be strangers who will probably see it. But it doesn't matter; I don't care" (Interviewee 3).

Another reason for managing impressions by platform-swinging was privacy concerns. As X. Wang (2016) stated, the Chinese concept of "yinsi" (隐私 in Chinese) is typically perceived as having negative implications.<sup>3</sup> The line between privacy and secrecy is blurred, stigmatizing the practice of protecting private space. Individuals raised in Chinese culture are likely to endure intense pressure to reveal information. In this light, our interviewees interpreted privacy in two different ways. On the one hand, some individuals conceptualized "privacy" within a moral framework, denoting aspects that were secret and must not be disclosed to people (Hua & Wang, 2023; X. Wang, 2016, p. 121). Those people were particularly concerned with preserving their ideal self-image, avoiding posting "yinsi" content so as not to trigger speculation and negative comments from acquaintances. Therefore, they swung to other platforms, which were mainly used for socializing with strangers.

"I don't consider Weibo a very private platform since my classmates and friends could easily find my account, so I avoid posting personal feelings on Weibo altogether. I find that Douban provides better privacy tools, and I can make my status invisible to others when needed" (Interviewee 24).

On the other hand, our interviewees, especially the younger generation, interpreted privacy as Western-style individual privacy. The growing demand for Western-style individual privacy stemmed from a desire to uphold personal autonomy and retain control over one's informational sphere through platform-swinging. While swingers believed that privacy was a moral issue and could express their negative feelings in front of strangers rather than acquaintances, swingers who

understood privacy from a Western style mainly controlled the visibility of posts to strangers.

"There is a tag on my WeChat called 'Unknown People.' I will completely block such people because I am worried about my privacy being leaked" (Interviewee 19).

### **Information Seeking**

Our findings suggested that individuals who engaged in platform-swinging to fulfill their information-seeking needs tended to display high complementary needs. Specifically, when searching for information within a particular domain on a platform, they were inclined to utilize additional platforms to obtain sufficient and comprehensive information. They actively pursued diverse types of information across different platforms to cater to their specific interests. For example, Weibo was frequently utilized for accessing breaking news as it was a prominent source for significant social events. Nevertheless, if users intended to acquire a more comprehensive and diverse perspective on the same events, they might swing to other platforms such as Zhihu.

"I come across a trending topic regarding layoffs in major factories on Weibo, but I struggle to find what I'm looking for solely based on keywords. As a result, I begin my search on Zhihu and then turn to Douban. I have observed that Douban offers genuine personal experiences, while Weibo tends to focus more on trending topics, providing concise information" (Interviewee 23).

The affordance of persistence, specifically immutability affordance at a feature level, was a crucial factor that facilitated effective information seeking. It allowed for the long-term preservation and retention of social media content, which can be accessed for future use. This further afforded the possibility of searchability, as publicly available information can be retrieved using relevant keywords (Rice et al., 2017). Searchability empowered information seekers to exercise greater discernment in their pursuit of knowledge.

"Zhihu often lags behind in terms of timely updates. Particularly as an electronic product reviewer, I have noticed that I can find valuable discussion data from the past few years on Zhihu that is not easily accessible elsewhere" (Interviewee 22).

In addition, algorithmic recommendations played a significant role in shaping the visibility of content, which, in turn, could impact users' content consumption and platform-swinging tendencies. For instance, despite both TikTok and Bilibili offering similar video-watching capabilities, some people, like Interviewee 15 and Interviewee 16, might prefer TikTok due to its superior algorithmic recommendation system. TikTok's system was able to consistently recommend relevant content, reducing the need for manual searches and promoting user engagement.

### **Aimless Swinging**

Our research suggested that individuals who performed aimless swinging without clear objectives or specific needs exhibited low levels of complementary and supplementary needs. The primary exhibition of aimless swinging was compulsive information browsing and private message checking. Our interviewees might spend a substantial amount of time on multiplatform engagement without necessarily accomplishing explicit tasks or addressing messages.

"I find myself frequently opening WeChat and Weibo, which is a waste of time and can hinder my study efficiency. However, Douban is the most time-consuming platform for me. I tend to browse Douban groups and consume content for a long time before going to bed" (Interviewee 4).

It is noteworthy that individuals with compulsive aimless swinging tendencies often viewed their behavior as a troublesome addiction that signified a lack of self-control over social media use. In addition, Reer et al. (2019) attributed this behavior to the fear of missing out, which can drive users to remain connected on platforms, frequently monitoring them for news and updates. Failure to do so might result in "feelings of being disconnected from the world" (Interviewee 2) and "the perception that others could not reach me" (Interviewee 3).

Research by Aladwani and Almarzouq (2016) suggests that the level of social media complementarity can exacerbate the relationship between interaction anxiety and compulsive social media use. In this light, our finding indicated that wider social media repertoires might lead to negative consequences, such as information overload. To alleviate these issues, interviewers with compulsive aimless swinging chose to reduce the number of platforms they use. They reported that short video platforms like TikTok were typically the first to be abandoned, as they provided a highly engaging and entertaining experience that might cause users to become easily immersed in their use.

"I used to swipe TikTok for an hour, which affected my sleep, so I uninstalled it" (Interviewee 21).

Aimless swingers took advantage of the affordances of accessibility and social presence on multiple platforms. The act of platform-swinging was incredibly effortless for these individuals, who readily swung among different platforms whenever they had time.

In light of the platform capitalism framework (Srnicek, 2017), we posit that as users become increasingly reliant on social media, there may be a "lock-in effect." That is, Srnicek (2017) indicated that "the more numerous the users who use a platform, the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone else" (p. 45). The reason is that platforms thrive on the wealth of data contributed by users. In this light, users would potentially get "trapped" on a specific platform since

they would be hesitant to give up their gathered data, connections, or investments to familiarize themselves with alternative platforms.

### ***Constraints Imposed on Platform-Swinging***

Based on our interviewees' responses, we found that platform-swinging was not completely unconstrained. In particular, interviewees mentioned inhabited cultures and the Chinese media landscape as two potential factors affecting users' platform-swinging behavior. First, the intrinsic values of collectivism and harmony have led Chinese people to engage in platform-swinging by choosing to seek out those platforms that were in line with their own social circles and interests. By platform-swinging, they created a harmonious social environment, thus avoiding conflicts caused by different values. Second, the Chinese media landscape influenced Chinese users' choice of social media repertoires for their platform-swinging. As stated by Madianou (2014), choosing one medium over another is itself part of the meaning in a polymedia environment. Therefore, even though WeChat's all-in-one nature can satisfy users' almost all needs, they still swing to other platforms to segment relationships and exert greater content visibility control. Because of privacy concerns and the collapse context, they had a higher desire to manage impressions by platform-swinging.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Confronted with a proliferation of media options, individuals tended to engage in platform-swinging, leveraging the diverse affordances offered by the polymedia landscape. Guided by U&G and CCT, this study sought to unravel the intricacies of platform-swinging conduct by introducing a taxonomy of platform-swinging and elucidating its linkages with various social media affordances. Drawing on the 32 semi-structured interviews, our study profiled four groups of platform-swinging behavior: social connecting, impression managing, information seeking, and aimless swinging.

In a nutshell, individuals with social connecting needs leveraged the association affordance of various platforms to contact different relationships in a complementary and supplementary manner. People managing impressions exhibited high supplementary needs and low complementary needs, often using visibility affordance to present various facets of their identity by projecting distinct images in front of different audiences on different platforms. For information-seeking needs, platforms collectively formed a complementary environment for accessing sufficient and comprehensive news and information by utilizing the affordances of persistence and visibility. Individuals who performed aimless swinging exhibited low levels of complementary and supplementary needs and regularly swung between multiple platforms without objective or specific needs, with the support of affordances of accessibility and social presence.

The typology approach offers a new perspective on understanding the motivations, activities, and content preferences that underpin people's media behavior in the current ecology. The typology proposed in this study holds significant theoretical value. The typological framework goes beyond simple classifications of media behavior and enables a more profound understanding of the intricate dynamics and mechanisms of this behavioral phenomenon. It not only exhibits distinct characteristics but is also influenced by various underlying factors, such as individuals' cultural, social, and relational considerations in the modern Chinese media landscape and society.

Our findings provided a nuanced conceptualization of platform-swinging behavior along two dimensions: complementary and supplementary needs. While previous studies of platform-swinging limitedly focused on social interaction motivations, such as self-presentation and relationship management (Tandoc et al., 2019), this study proposed a theoretical way to gain a more detailed understanding of the motives driving platform-swinging. Theoretically, it can serve as the basis for the development of more accurate measurements of platform-swinging behavior. This, in turn, can improve our comprehension of individuals' consumption patterns across multiple platforms in the current polymedia environment. Practically, this typology can aid researchers, designers, and managers in comprehending the motives behind users' platform-swinging. This knowledge can inform enhancements to the interface design and information flow of platforms.

Another noteworthy aspect is that the different behaviors of platform-swinging are associated with distinct affordances integrated into the polymedia environment. Social media affordances, as perceived by users, facilitate greater possibilities for platform-swinging. The elucidation of the interplay between the typology of platform-swinging behaviors and their corresponding affordances establishes an initial theoretical groundwork, laying the foundation for future investigations into the hypothesized relationship between the two. Adopting an affordance-based approach provided a flexible and sustainable method for comprehending the fundamental qualities of media ecology, which could also help to overcome variations in settings, timeframes, and platforms (Ellison & Boyd, 2013).

There are several limitations that need to be considered while interpreting the current findings. First, compared with China's social class structure, there is a notable overrepresentation of younger individuals and students, and people from low social classes are underrepresented among our interviewees, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the wider population. Therefore, future research can encompass a more diverse demographic spectrum when studying platform-swinging behavior. Second, WeChat's all-in-one nature may raise privacy and impression management concerns, and the context collapse on WeChat promotes platform-swinging. Thus, we argue that the impression-managing motivation observed among Chinese users may be less

seen in other media environments. Third, Chinese culture values collectivism and harmony, leading users to strategically choose platforms aligned with their social circles and interests. This deliberate selection aims to foster homogeneous communities and minimize opinion clashes, leading to platform-swinging as a nuanced strategy to curate online experiences. Hence, it is important to exercise caution when attempting to generalize these findings to other cultures. Finally, our data was collected during the COVID-19 lockdown period, so the results might be different if the data collection was conducted under ordinary circumstances.

In conclusion, this study advances our understanding of the new media environment and behavior in three ways. First, we offered another piece of evidence that demonstrates the platform-swinging behavior in the polymedia context (Tandoc et al., 2019). Second, we advanced the scholarship by delineating four distinct groups of platform-swinging behavior along users' supplementary and complementary needs, including (1) social connecting, (2) impression managing, (3) information seeking, and (4) aimless swinging. Third, we have identified certain social media affordances that are associated with each type of platform-swinging behavior.

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## Notes

1. Different labels have been created to emphasize different aspects, such as social affordances (e.g., Wellman et al., 2003), sociotechnical affordances (e.g., Bazarova, 2012), or communicative affordances (e.g., Hutchby & Barnett, 2005). We believe the adoption captured and underscored individuals' perceptions and contextual factors.
2. We acknowledge alternative approaches proposed by the field (e.g., Schrock, 2015). Our selection of taxonomy was guided by two criteria: (1) affordances that can explain platform selection and use. Therefore, affordances lacking variation across the platforms, such as scalability, as proposed by Boyd (2010), are excluded as they represent a defining feature common to all social media platforms; (2) affordances that are proposed to characterize social media platforms. In this light, taxonomies

proposed to describe affordances of devices (e.g., Schrock, 2015), features (searchability proposed in Rice et al., 2017), or users' behaviors (self-presentation proposed by Mesgari & Faraj, 2012) are excluded. Taking all these considerations into account, we believe that the taxonomy proposed by Treem and Leonardi (2013) represents an appropriate one to use, which is posited to be "general enough to be applicable to a range of different platforms but cover the most significant and controversial aspects of the use of social media" (Ronzyn et al., 2023, p. 8).

3. In China, activities such as closing one's room door are considered abnormal, and the practice of entering others' spaces without prior warning is frequent.

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