

Keep Elders in Touch under Covid-19: Analysing WeChat's Usability for Chinese Elders

by Changhao Li (490339459)

During the Covid-19 (or formally, SARS-CoV-2) pandemic that started in late 2019, governments around the globe constantly deployed local, neighborhood-wide lockdowns or self-isolation measures to scrub virus spread from the early beginning of every potential infection chain. One of the consequences is that elders might be forced into situations where they have to live separately with their children during the lockdown or self-isolation period. During this period, elders' daily activities might be seriously affected, including the loss of face-to-face chat opportunities with family and friends. This means that elders are pushed to live online and adapt to the use of social media. Therefore, a well-designed application with good usability design and HCI experience would be favored and welcomed by the elders.

In China, WeChat is one of the most trending apps for contacting others. As an app with communication, payment, location, and many other services, WeChat has features that promote an online communication way of life. Is WeChat also promoting elder-friendly design and function? What problems do elders often encounter when they are using WeChat? This paper starts with a preliminary survey and need-finding user studies, and then moves into interface analysis using both HCI and statistical methods and further try to build user models via classification methods. Heuristic evaluation of WeChat and the validity assessment of heuristics for elders are also part of this study.

This thesis project serves as part of the broader "keep elders in touch" project and it aims to investigate the characteristics of Chinese elders' behavior during the Covid-19 pandemic, including the difficulties they encounter when they are using modern technologies as well as a detailed WeChat interface analysis. This paper contributes in 4 aspects: a) examine the current keep-in-touch situation of Chinese elders during Covid-19; b) review the literature on recent and relevant academic projects; c) analyze the WeChat user interface in detail and construct the links to past projects; and d) collect data on WeChat using HCI methods, including questionnaire, think aloud and heuristic evaluation, thus highlight usability issues of WeChat, which could potentially improve Chinese elders' experience during lockdowns or self-isolation periods.