

WECHAT: How does culture impact people's use of technology?

COMM 3165 Evaluation and Usability Testing

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Executive Summary

Unlike the Western communication application marketplace which is saturated with competitors, China shows a world with one clear winner, WeChat. Popular and well-integrated, the application is a must have for visiting China. This is partially because of its widely ranging features from the normal like chat, stickers, and call/video to the innovative like scan QR code, in-application payments, and built-in plug-in support.

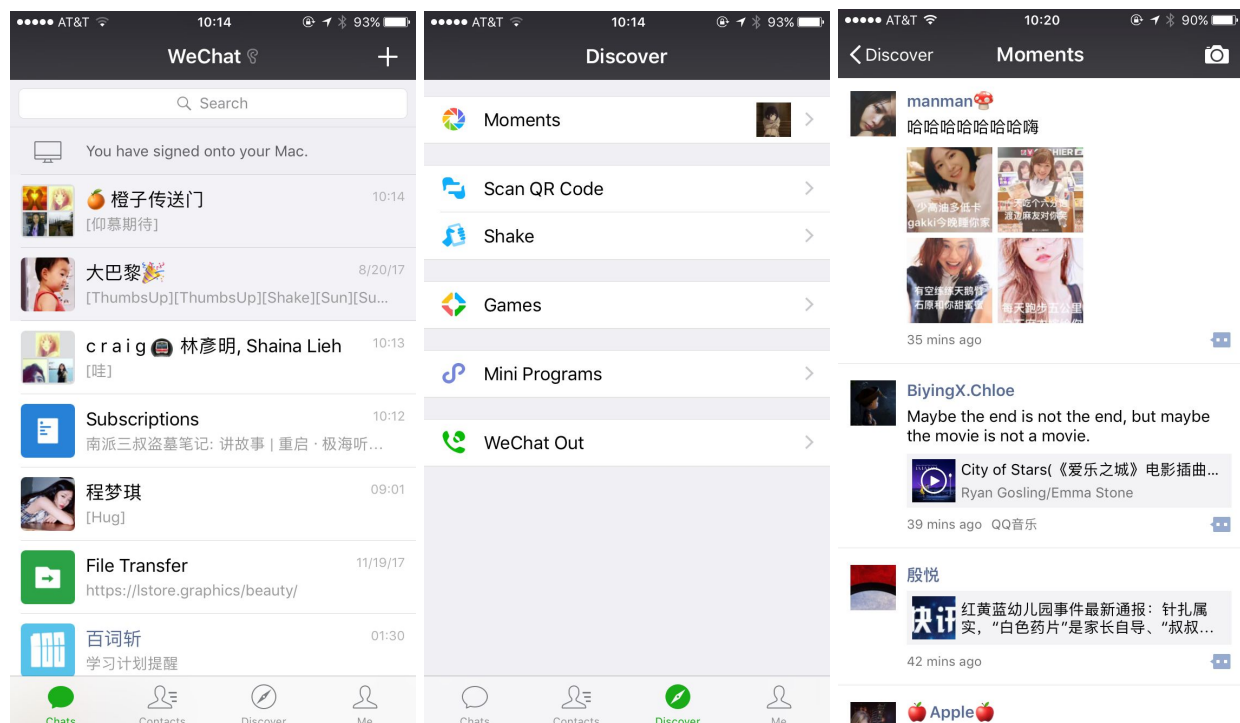


Figure 1. Various screenshots of typical WeChat features and views

Just in the span of the past 5 years, Facebook and other Western apps have slowly been adopting the practices and structural functionalities that WeChat first pioneered. Yet, WeChat seems to have had little success in becoming a staple social platform in the United States market even with its inventive structure and abundant functionality. Seeking to understand its mainstream absence, we wanted to know how culture and functionality factored in:

- *What role does culture play in people's preferences of functionality on WeChat?*

We used a convenience sample to gather two sets of complementary data that we split into representing three distinct ethnicity groups: non-Chinese Americans, Chinese Americans, and Chinese. Through a survey of 73 participants, we obtained data highlighting general social media application usage, knowledge and use of WeChat's plethora of features, and reported frequencies of use. Then, we drew 8 people from the survey group to participate in interviews, in which we investigated the underlying attitudes and behavioral decisions each ethnicity group had in order to find reasons for the apparent ineffective nature of the current English user-interface (EUI).

Within these findings we discovered that the WeChat team for the most part has simply translated WeChat's functionality from Chinese to English and other languages without considering that some features are culturally specific and mainly useful to Chinese users. Our research uncovered several interesting key findings that the WeChat team should look into:

- a. Chinese users are still the main audience of WeChat, and distinctly a higher percentage than Chinese Americans and non-Chinese Americans.

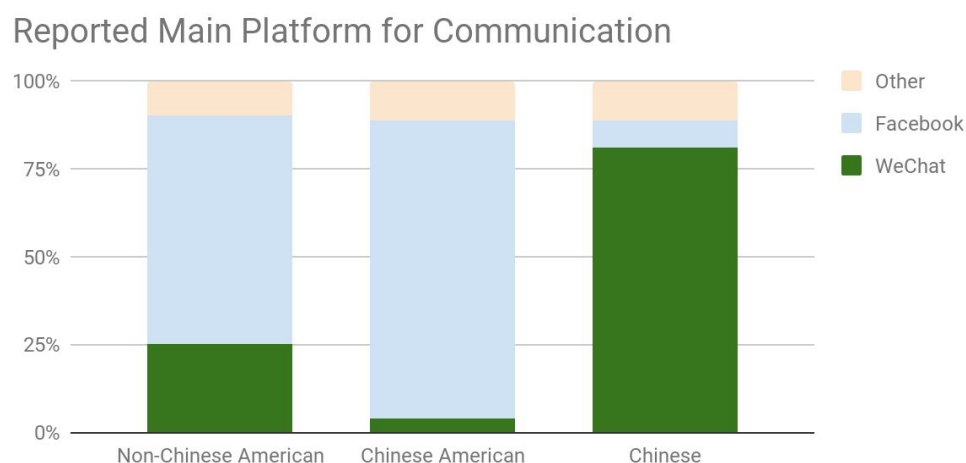


Figure 2. Our sample confirmed our guess that WeChat's user base in the U.S. is largely Chinese.

- b. We originally expected Chinese Americans would use WeChat in a way that resembled Chinese, at least with behavior or attitudes somewhere in-between non-Chinese Americans and Chinese. However, we found that in some aspects they use WeChat in an entirely independent fashion from both demographics.

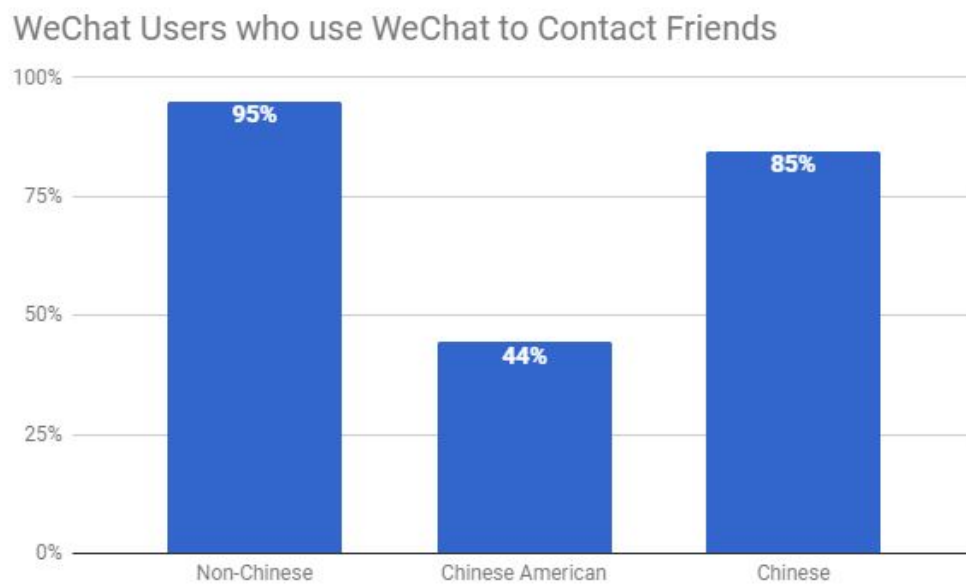


Figure 3. Chinese Americans notably use WeChat less to contact friends than Non-Chinese or Chinese.

- c. In the English version, people prefer culturally-appropriate terms for functional features over literal translated terms. The more concise and descriptive, the better.

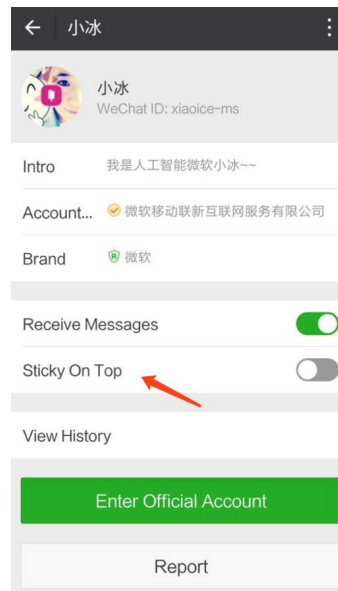


Figure 4. A screenshot of the 'Sticky on Top' toggle which is an example of a deemed bad translation.

- d. Additionally, some features are almost never used by all 3 ethnicity groups

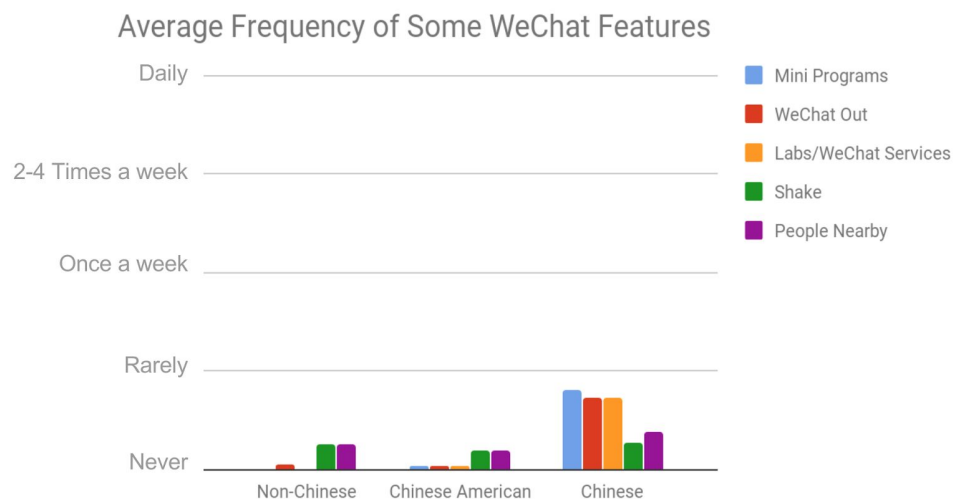


Figure 5. Some features were universally not utilized.

Our findings illustrated that non-Chinese Americans, Chinese Americans, and Chinese have some difference as well as similarity in terms of preference on functionality. In order to attract more users and aggrandize the popularity in the international market outside China, here are some takeaways for WeChat designers and developers:

1. WeChat should maintain its current features for Chinese users and create a different set of culturally appropriate features for other ethnicity users.
2. WeChat should consider the discrepancy between different ethnicity groups instead of treating them as a whole.
3. WeChat should conform in-application translations to culturally appropriate and concise translations.
4. WeChat should remove features that are rarely used by all users or re-orient their functions in order to refine the app.

WeChat Background

WeChat is one of the most popular social platforms in China with around 1 billion global monthly active users. When it was first created it only had the Chinese name, “Weixin,” but was re-named in 2012 to “WeChat” for the purpose of expanding to an international market. WeChat has a variety of features including: Messaging, Moments, Scan QR code, Red Pocket, Sticker Customization, Sticky on Top, and so on (we will elaborate on some of these features in a later section). WeChat offers text messaging, voice messaging, video conferencing, personal profile posting, video games, et cetera. Users can also shop, bank, transfer money, order food, and Uber all within the application interface. The hybrid functionalities of WeChat attract users from many other social platforms and thus, has helped WeChat become an important tool for daily communication, work, and entertainment.

Evaluation Goals

The focus of our research was the intersection of culture, particularly the United States and China, and technology, WeChat. The underlying purpose behind this particular interest was analyzing the usability and translatability of technology originating from one culture into another. With this goal of quantifying the effect of Chinese culture on WeChat for its vast variety of expanding audiences, we sought to analyze how different groups of people used WeChat.

A successful study would reveal the underlying behavioral patterns of the different user groups on WeChat, indicating commonalities that each specific ethnicity had in addition to the distinctions. This information would prove useful in giving WeChat instructions on how to improve its user interfaces in relation to each audience.

Research Methods

We conducted a Qualtrics survey and in-person, semi-structured interviews with a particular focus on the differences and similarities between three WeChat user groups: non-Chinese American users, Chinese American users, and Chinese users. Each group was asked the same set of questions from the same Qualtrics link and the interviews were all conducted from the same protocol. The interviewees were chosen from the participants of our survey.

We recruited 73 participants to take the survey and 8 participants for the interview. Our first method, the survey, collected data from 20 non-Chinese Americans (27.40%), 27 Chinese Americans (36.99%), and 26 Chinese WeChat users (35.62%). The in-person, semi-structured interviews, our second method, procured detailed answers from 3 non-Chinese Americans, 3 Chinese Americans, and 2 Chinese WeChat users. Our study targeted college-age participants and received an average age of 21.6 years with a range of 18-25 years old, not including two outliers from the non-Chinese American group of 27 and 37 years old. The non-Chinese American group had a greater proportion of males while both the Chinese and Chinese American groups had more female respondents. In total, there were 44 (60.27%) females and 28 males (38.37%).

How did we recruit our participants?

As a precondition to participating in our study, we had a preliminary question confirming that participants use WeChat regularly or have been familiarized from previous use. To evenly distribute the workload and guarantee comparable response, each of us actively collected data from a particular social group: Qicheng recruited Chinese users, Shaina recruited Chinese Americans users, and Craig recruited non-Chinese users. We used *convenience sampling*, where

we found college students that we knew used WeChat and were easy to reach. This was done by sending direct links to our Qualtrics survey through our own personal connections and non-public social media outreach (Facebook Messenger, WeChat, and SMS). Our original intention was each collecting 15 responses per survey group but we surpassed that number and ended up gathering more users for each group. While this resulted in the numbers becoming uneven with the non-Chinese American group having 6-7 people less than the other two groups, the additional data allowed for more visible data patterns. We also intended to recruit 9 participants for our interviews but ended up with 8.

What concepts did you focus on and what did you ask to learn about them?

The purpose of the surveys was to gather factual information and behavioral data, while our interviews served to gather attitudes and preferences. In order to gather such data from our Qualtrics survey, we only asked close-ended questions and left the open-ended questions for the interviews. The first section of our survey asked pre-screening questions related to ethnicity/nationality and main social media platforms. The second section asked particular questions about WeChat usage: if they still use it, use the Chinese or English version, and importantly, use a list of features mentioned on a scale of frequently to rarely. Following that, the third section asked about their interaction with Moments, a scrollable wall where users can make posts about anything: articles, daily life, et cetera. In addition, we asked questions on customization such as if they had a profile picture, knew how to change their QR code style, or had LinkedIn account linked to their profile. We specifically asked questions about Moments and customization with the hope of seeing culture intersect behavior. The results, however did not demonstrate this. Lastly, we closed with demographic questions such as age and gender.

The interviews aimed to ask open-ended questions that prompted our participants to voice their preferences on certain features, the terminology used after translation, and other social applications. A section of the interview included a think-aloud protocol where they walked through how they normally use WeChat. They subsequently identified the features they use in various social groups like family, friends, and recent group chats. Additionally, we asked what they liked or disliked about WeChat, or even if there was anything they wished the application had. Finally, we opened the discussion to any additional WeChat-related commentary. Through these interviews, we hoped to identify differences in the attitudes of each social group in regards to the functions of WeChat and their in-application behavior.

Conclusions

Our evaluation was successful in uncovering four key findings about the way that WeChat is used and the attitudes of those using the application. These findings signal how WeChat is successfully used for its largest audience, Chinese users, and provides points of improvement for WeChat in general and as it extends its reach towards an international audience.

First Finding:

Our data confirms the hypothesis that WeChat still caters to its Chinese audience first and foremost, and its main audience is that group in relation to non-Chinese or Chinese Americans. Chinese use WeChat more out of the other two groups. Not only do Chinese use the application more, they also use WeChat's different features more than Chinese Americans and non-Chinese Americans more frequently.

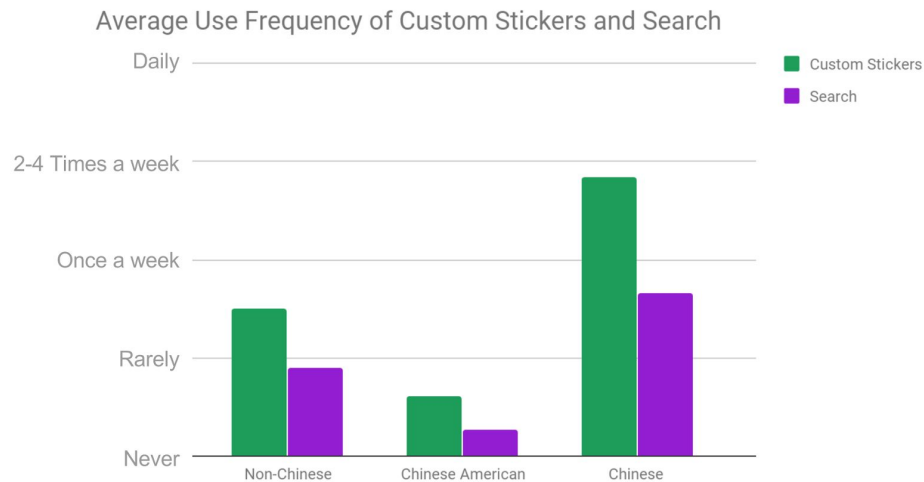


Figure 6. Chinese Americans notably used some features less than non-Chinese and Chinese.

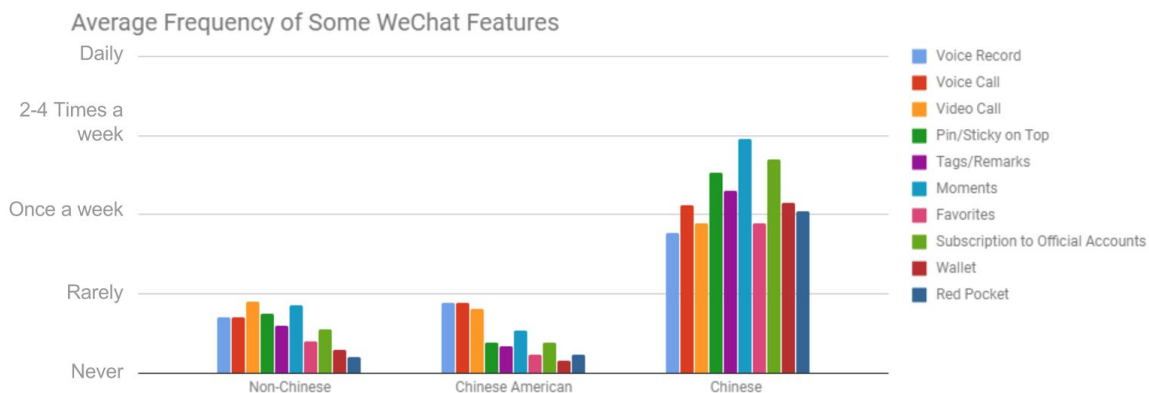


Figure 7. Chinese used most WeChat features more than non-Chinese or Chinese American.

Second Finding:

In some aspects, Chinese Americans culturally functioned differently from our Non-Chinese American and Chinese groups. We expected Chinese Americans to be in between Chinese and non-Chinese Americans as Chinese Americans have the integration of two cultures. However, instead of being an indicator of cross-cultural users, Chinese Americans used some features notably less than non-Chinese Americans and drastically less than the Chinese group.

In question 10 where we asked about the frequency using different features, we found out that Chinese Americans were the least frequent users of Scan QR Code, Custom Stickers, and Search, while Chinese were the most frequent and non-Chinese Americans were in between.

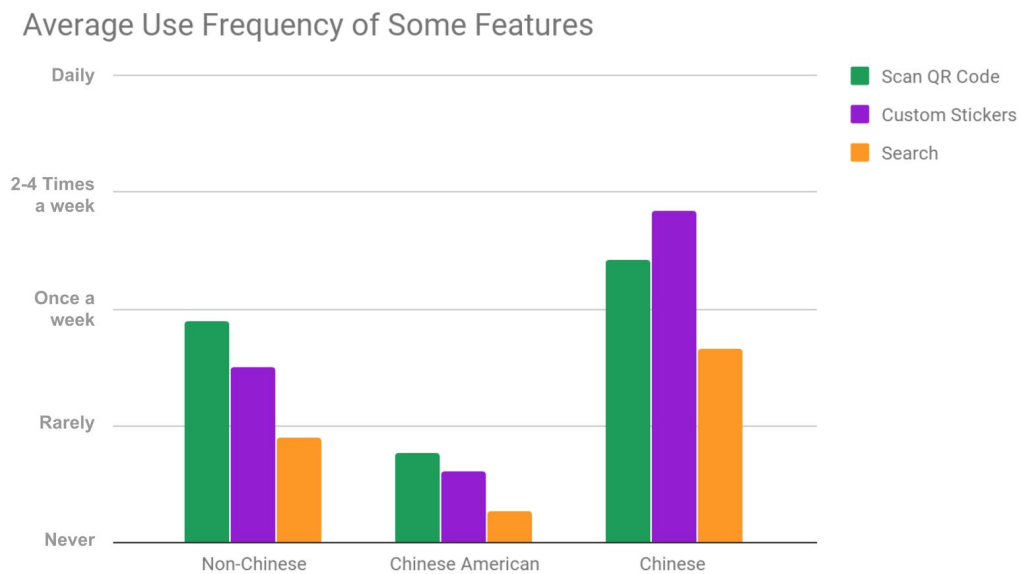


Figure 8. Usage of these features varied amongst each group.

Similarly, illustrated in Figure 9, question 4 sought to determine for what purposes users deemed important different communication application usage. When asked about the most important task in using WeChat, the majority (95%) of Non-Chinese Americans used it for contacting friends; Chinese Americans for contacting family (78%) and less so friends (44%); and Chinese equally friends (85%) and family (88%). It clearly shows that Chinese Americans behaved more like Chinese when it comes to using WeChat to contact family; however, Chinese Americans are the least using WeChat to contact friends.

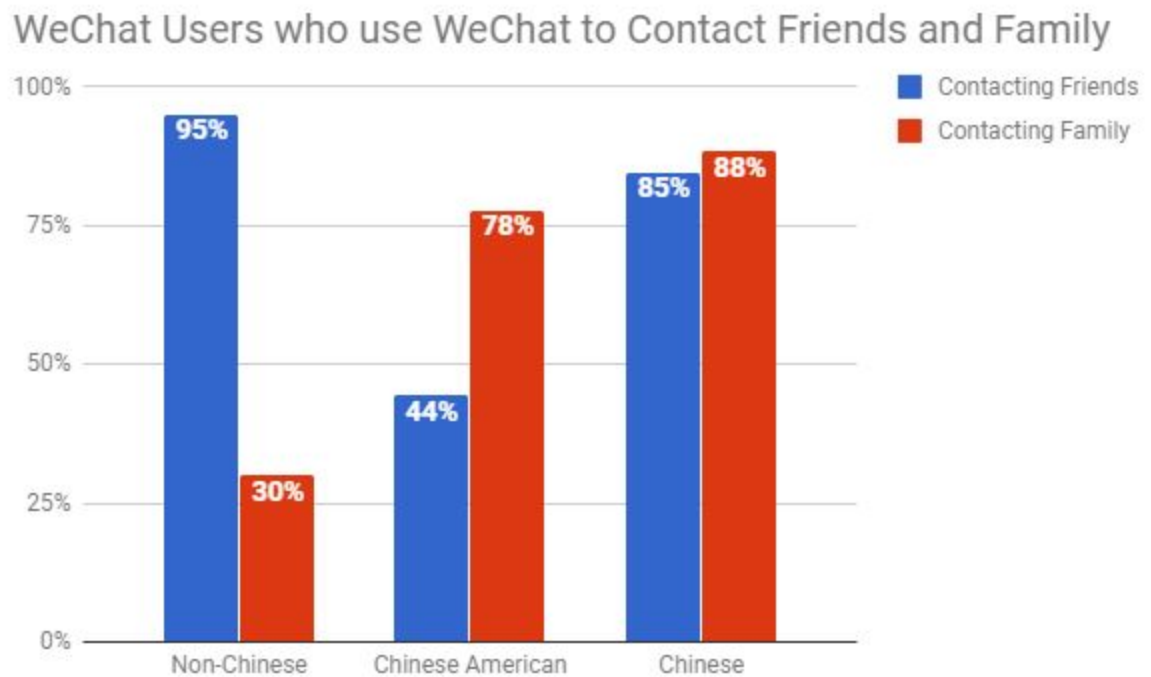


Figure 9. Chinese Americans notably use WeChat less to contact friends but contact family similar to Chinese.

Third Finding:

People prefer culturally-appropriate terms for functional features over literal translated terms. Regardless of the ethnicity, every interviewee preferred culturally appropriate and concise terms rather than literal translation.

Although some Chinese users preferred literal translations like “Sticky on Top”, Chinese Americans and non-Chinese unanimously agreed that the culturally appropriate term was better. While those couple Chinese users argued for the “cuter” or “more interesting” app-specific terminology, their responses can be ignored as they constitute opinions of an audience that will not use the English version.

Another point relating to translation of features went on to that culturally appropriate translated terms are more concise and descriptive. For example, in the interviews, one Chinese

interviewee said that “pin” was shorter and described the feature more specifically than “Sticky on the Top” does in English context. This opinion was expressed by both Chinese American and non-Chinese interviewees. Another example shows that even Chinese users considered “Scan and Scan” strange in English context while it is a common grammar structure in Chinese.

Chinese American: “Pin is a better describer and more appropriate.”

Chinese American: “The direct translation Scan and Scan sounds strange.”

Chinese: “Definitely Scan QR code. Scan and Scan is too weird and it might confuse people who don’t know Chinese. ”

Non-Chinese: “Pin is better because it’s more concise and grammatically correct”

Non-Chinese: “Scan QR Code is more descriptive of the function”

Fourth Finding:

Some features are almost never used by all 3 ethnicity groups. These features are used either rarely by the Chinese participants or almost never by non-Chinese and Chinese American participants. These features include mini programs, WeChat Out, Labs/WeChat Services, Shake, and People Nearby.

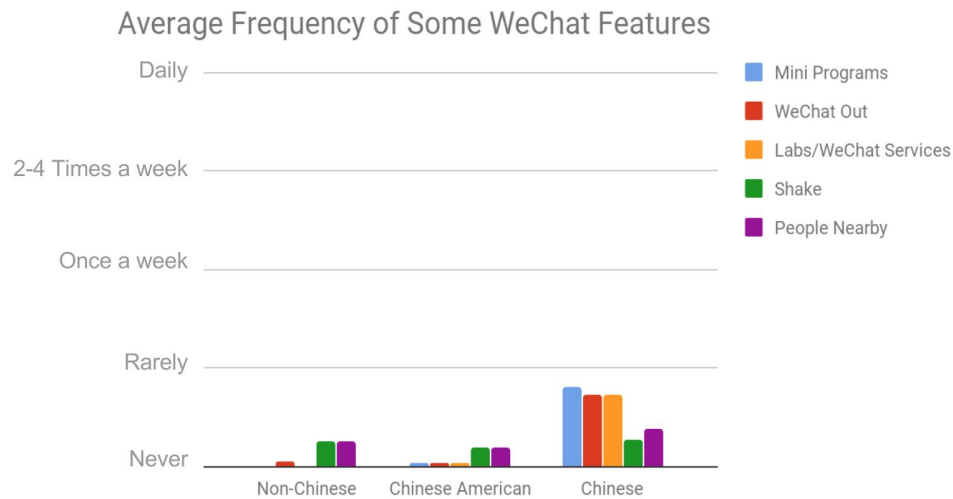


Figure 10. Some features were universally not utilized

This finding was confirmed by the comments received from our interviewees regarding what features of WeChat they disliked the most:

Chinese American: "Shake is sketchy."

Chinese American: "I never talk to strangers on WeChat, so I never use the Shake feature."

Chinese: "I don't talk to strangers on WeChat."

Non-Chinese: "Shake has pervy people, that's why I don't use it."

Non-Chinese: "I dislike Shake and People Nearby."

Recommendations

First Finding

WeChat caters to Chinese users the most. Our Chinese participants use WeChat's overall application and features more out of the other two groups.

WeChat should focus on understanding the different group demographics in their audience.

Because of this, we recommend to include features and incentives that will appeal beyond

Chinese users and thus, improve usage of features and overall application. For example, users

redeem a free redeemable drink after the 10th payment of using Red Pocket (wallet feature). This could increase the incentive to use that particular feature.

Second Finding

Instead of being an indicator of cross-cultural users, Chinese Americans used features remarkably less than non-Chinese Americans and drastically less than the Chinese group.

To our surprise, our data indicates that the Chinese American group behaves differently for those certain features than non-Chinese or Chinese. We recommend that WeChat analyze its user base(s) in more depth as to why this happened. By understanding why, the WeChat design team can understand how to better cater to Chinese Americans and other 2nd-generation immigrant groups.

Third Finding

People prefer culturally-appropriate terms for functional features over literal translated terms.

In the English version of WeChat, the cultural appropriate term “Scan QR Code” not literal translation “Scan and Scan” is used. We recommend WeChat to replace “Sticky on Top” with “Pin” term. “Sticky on Top” is direct translation from 置顶 (zhǐdǐng), while “Pin” is a culturally-appropriated term. This would help keep WeChat’s application consistent.

Fourth Finding

Some features are almost never used by all 3 ethnicity groups.

One of our interviewees said,

“I would like to see a simpler and prettier design.” In the screenshot of the discover tab below, two of the unused features are listed there. We recommend taking out those two features.

Perhaps this will help declutter the application and contribute to a simpler design interface.

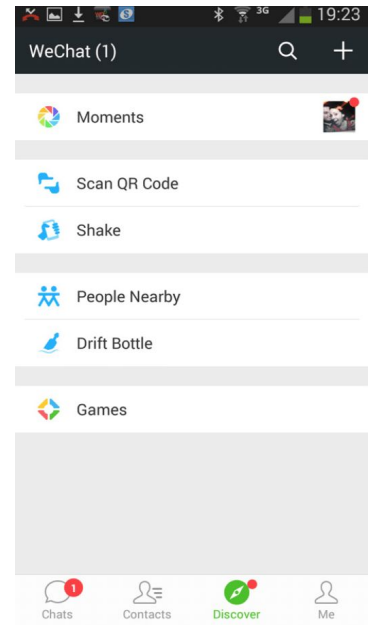


Figure 11. Discover Tab