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User Experience Research on WeChat Read APP from the Perspective of Social Reading: Postprint

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Abstract

The advent of the social reading era has prompted mobile reading applications to incorporate social features extensively. Among these, the WeChat Reading APP has rapidly proliferated among users and exerted considerable influence by leveraging a social relationship network constructed through its WeChat friends' social chain. This study, situated within the perspective of social reading and grounded in in-depth interviews with 10 WeChat Reading APP users, adopts the five elements of user experience as its theoretical framework. It specifically analyzes the social attributes of the WeChat Reading APP across three dimensions: self-presentation within personal profiles, the “sense of companionship” during the reading process, and interactive sharing that intertwines acquaintance-based and stranger-based social interactions, thereby deriving research conclusions. Furthermore, it explores the significance that the integration of reading and social interaction models brings to users in the social reading era.

Full Text

Preamble

A Study on User Experience of WeChat Reading App from the Perspective of Social Reading

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Abstract

The advent of the social reading era has prompted mobile reading applications to incorporate social features. Among these, WeChat Reading App has rapidly gained traction and exerted considerable influence through its social network built upon WeChat's friend connections. This study examines the social attributes of WeChat Reading App from the perspective of social reading. Based on in-depth interviews with 10 WeChat Reading App users and employing the

theoretical framework of the five elements of user experience, this research specifically analyzes three aspects: self-presentation on personal homepages, the “sense of companionship” during reading, and interactive sharing under the intertwining of acquaintance and stranger social networks. The study draws conclusions and further explores the significance that the integration of reading and socialization brings to users in the era of social reading.

Keywords: user experience; user experience elements; social reading; WeChat Reading App

In the wave of digital technology and nationwide reading initiatives, traditional paper-based reading is declining, and digital reading has become an increasingly important mode of reading for people. The “2021 China Digital Reading Report” released in May 2022 shows that the scale of digital reading users in China reached 506 million in 2021 [1]. Concurrently, with the continuous development of social media, digital reading software has increasingly incorporated social functions, heralding the arrival of the social reading era. Among these platforms, WeChat Reading App has successfully entered the first tier of mobile digital reading applications within just six years, leveraging its social relationships built upon WeChat’s friend network and its rich repository of electronic book resources. According to official data released by WeChat Reading at the end of 2019, the app’s registered users had reached 210 million by November 2019, and this number continues to grow.

Previous research on WeChat Reading App has provided valuable insights in several areas: deconstructing the phenomenon of social reading through the app, examining its profit models, analyzing user self-presentation, and investigating the interaction ritual chains within the platform. However, few studies have focused on users’ actual reading experiences and feelings while using WeChat Reading App, and even fewer have analyzed what experiences and meanings the app’s social attributes bring to users in the era of social reading. Therefore, this study, from the perspective of social reading, employs semi-structured interviews to investigate deep users of WeChat Reading App, analyzing the user experience elements involved in the app’s social attributes, with the aim of providing theoretical and practical insights for optimizing user experience on the platform.

2. Concept Definition and Literature Review

A literature search on CNKI using the keywords “social reading” and “community reading” reveals that research in this field has increased since 2011. Regarding the definition of social reading, Zhong Xiong provided an authoritative interpretation in his article “Social Reading: The Future of Reading,” arguing that social reading is reader-centered, a new form of reading that supports sharing, communication, and dissemination, characterized by user-generated content (UGC), where multi-dimensional interactions among readers can infinitely amplify reading value [2]. Cai Qi, in “Changes in Reading in the Mobile Internet

Era: Rethinking the Phenomenon of Shallow Reading,” suggests that social reading is a form of active participation and interactive sharing, representing part of audience participatory culture [3]. Through a literature review, Wang Haiyan organizes and summarizes current research on social reading, identifying its characteristics as being reader-centered, providing personalized recommendations from content providers, and emphasizing interactivity and social behavior during the reading process [4]. Ran Hua and Zhong Ya argue that in the digital era, the connotation of social reading has expanded from an emphasis on the social nature of reading to an interactive, socialized, and re-tribalized information dissemination model [5]. Meanwhile, some scholars have conducted specific studies focusing on particular platforms or media involved in social reading, such as research on social media-based reading like Weibo and WeChat subscription accounts, or book-oriented reading that integrates social functions like WeChat Reading and Douban Reading. In studies on WeChat Reading App within the context of social reading, researchers have mostly adopted a macro perspective to analyze the phenomenon of social reading through the app, paying relatively little attention to users’ actual experiences and feelings. Since social reading is fundamentally user-centered, this study builds upon previous research by further analyzing the experiences brought to users by the social attributes of WeChat Reading App and introducing the five elements of user experience for specific deconstruction.

Jesse James Garrett, known as the “father of AJAX,” proposed the five elements of user experience model in his book *The Elements of User Experience: User-Centered Design for the Web*. Originally developed for websites, this model has now been extended to the design of various digital products. Specifically, the model divides the entire product development process into five layers: strategy, scope, structure, skeleton, and surface, examining product user experience across these dimensions. The strategy layer focuses on user needs from outside the enterprise and product objectives from within; the scope layer primarily concerns the product’s functional combination and content requirements; the structure layer deals mainly with information architecture and interaction design; the skeleton layer involves interface design, navigation design, and information design; finally, the surface layer focuses on visual design, creating the sensory experience for users [6].

Based on the above literature review and conceptual clarification, this study proposes the following two research questions:

Q1: What kind of user experience does the social attribute of WeChat Reading App generate?

Q2: What meanings does the social attribute of WeChat Reading App bring to users?

3. Research Methods

To answer the research questions, this study adopts a qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews. Compared with quantitative research, this approach focuses more on the research subjects themselves, better facilitating the exploration of people's internal experiences and selves, and is suitable for understanding the processes and meanings of experience [7]. During interviews, it is also easier to discover the particularities and differences among individuals. Simultaneously, by listening to respondents' narratives and asking timely follow-up questions, the researcher can understand the meanings constructed by respondents to the greatest extent possible in a relatively natural and value-neutral context, thereby drawing conclusions to the research questions.

The interview questions designed for this study primarily involve three aspects. First, the investigation of respondents' usage of WeChat Reading, including total reading time, frequency of use, number of friends, etc. Second, the exploration of users' specific experiences within the WeChat Reading App, mainly focusing on social attributes, with specific questions covering bookshelf display under the influence of friend lists, viewing annotations or others' thoughts during reading, and sharing and interaction behaviors with friends. Third, understanding users' attitudes, usage feelings, and suggestions regarding WeChat Reading App's reading model based on WeChat friend social chains, with a free discussion on the relationship between social interaction and reading conducted at the end of each interview.

The researcher recruited 10 WeChat Reading users through personal social connections and posts in Douban groups. Most participants were deep users who had established social relationships in WeChat Reading and had accumulated long reading times, while a few were fringe users who had stopped using the app frequently after a period of use. Each participant underwent an in-depth interview lasting 30-60 minutes. Among the 10 respondents, 4 were male and 6 were female, aged 19-34, all with bachelor's degrees or higher (see Table 1), matching the user demographic profile of WeChat Reading according to Baidu Index. All respondents had established or previously established social relationships in WeChat Reading, which had influenced their reading behavior. Participants voluntarily joined the study and were informed about the research content, anonymity, and other privacy protection measures. All interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via WeChat voice chat and were fully recorded with respondents' consent. Following the interviews, the researcher transcribed all recordings verbatim and conducted further data analysis using the qualitative analysis software NVivo12, ultimately drawing research conclusions.

4. Analysis of WeChat Reading App's Social Attributes Under the User Experience Elements Model

Based on Jesse James Garrett's five elements of user experience model and in-depth interviews with 10 deep users of WeChat Reading, this study conducts a user experience elements analysis focusing on the main aspects of the app's social attributes, drawing relevant conclusions.

4.1 Self-Presentation in Personal Homepage

Self-presentation theory was first proposed by Erving Goffman, who metaphorically described social interaction as theatrical performance and emphasized that self-presentation plays a crucial role in defining individuals' social status and determining types of social interaction, implying that it is the behavior of controlling how others respond to oneself [8]. Simply put, self-presentation is an important behavior for individuals in social processes. As a "reading + social" mobile reading application, WeChat Reading App must also satisfy users' needs for self-presentation. During interviews, respondent S3 stated: "Since most of my friends are acquaintances, I will set some books in my bookshelf as private reading, such as some 'brainless novels.' This is probably a way to manage and present my self-image." WeChat Reading users have self-presentation management needs regarding personal reading information in the app, such as reading time, currently reading books, badges, and thoughts.

Therefore, based on the strategy layer's established positioning and user needs, WeChat Reading App has set up numerous specific functions in the scope layer to support users' self-presentation management, including private reading settings, decoy bookshelf functions, and permission settings for personal homepage thoughts, bookshelves, book lists, and badges.

From the structure layer perspective, the interaction design offers convenient pathways for these functional modules. For instance, long-pressing a book allows users to set its display permissions, and clicking "Me" in the bottom navigation, then entering the "Me" interface and clicking the settings icon in the upper right corner enables permission management for personal homepage bookshelves, book lists, badges, and thoughts. In terms of hierarchical information architecture, personal homepage information is divided into four main sections: "Reading Data," "Badges," "Bookshelf," and "Thoughts," with clear structural levels and user-friendly navigation.

At the skeleton layer, the personal homepage bookshelf and badge displays adopt a gallery-style design, showcasing book covers and titles. The gallery-style bookshelf design intuitively displays each book's content and clearly shows which books have been read recently. Books set to private reading have a specific private reading icon in the lower right corner of the interface, making self-presentation management more convenient. The gallery-style badge design enhances the aesthetic appeal of user self-presentation and can also motivate users to read. The thoughts module on the personal homepage interface uses an

information flow design, which aligns with user habits and facilitates permission settings.

Finally, at the surface layer, the personal homepage employs white as WeChat Reading App's theme color, creating a clean, crisp, and visually clear and harmonious effect. Light gray dividers separate each module, facilitating users' viewing of self-presentation across different sections and providing visual enjoyment. The personal homepage avatar is set as circular, which offers stronger focus compared to square avatars.

WeChat Reading provides a good user experience in terms of self-presentation on user homepages, satisfying users' needs for self-management in social reading. However, during interviews, some users mentioned that "WeChat Reading App does not have a function to hide personal reading data, such as reading time or number of friends, which leaves room for improvement. After all, some people hope to minimize self-presentation in WeChat Reading and become an 'invisible reader.'"

4.2 "Companionship" in the Reading Process

From the strategy layer perspective, as a digital reading software, WeChat Reading App's primary role is to provide users with a good experience during book reading. The app's slogan, "Let reading no longer be lonely," also reflects the importance of social attributes in its product positioning. After investigating WeChat Reading App users, the study found that the vast majority of interviewees expressed a need for social attributes during the reading process within the app.

Extending from the strategy layer to the scope layer, the study found that WeChat Reading has incorporated many social functions with a "sense of companionship" during book reading. For example, the book detail page features a comment section, allowing users to view others' thoughts and reply or like them. During reading, users can view other users' thoughts on highlighted sentences at any time and interact through likes and comments. At the end of each chapter, functions for liking, viewing thoughts, and sharing to Moments are provided to enhance the sense of companionship. The reading leaderboard offers rankings of reading time between users and their friends, stimulating competitive awareness, fostering reading habits, and indirectly increasing user stickiness. The discovery homepage of WeChat Reading App features multiple "Recommended for You" cards that provide daily recommendations based on users' reading history and what friends are reading, enabling users to continuously discover books of interest and maintain reading habits.

From the structure layer perspective, during reading, clicking on highlighted text in the main body brings up other users' thoughts on the selected passage, helping users better understand book content. Additionally, without clicking any buttons, users can naturally perform interactive functions such as liking, sharing, and viewing chapter thoughts at the end of each chapter. The clear and

convenient setup of social functions during reading allows users to constantly experience a sense of companionship. Respondent S5 stated: “I check highlights at any time during reading, especially when I can’t understand a sentence. Viewing others’ thoughts can broaden my horizons and improve reading efficiency and experience. It’s also very convenient—just one click and a pop-up appears.”

At the skeleton and surface layers, the main reading interface employs a card-based information flow design for random recommendation cards. These cards occupy the optimal position on the page with the largest proportion and font size. Through the design of different module positions and proportion allocation on the page, it can be inferred that WeChat Reading App prefers to recommend books to users through what friends are reading during the book-finding stage before reading, reflecting the app’s unique WeChat friend social attributes. In the reading process interface, thought bubble pop-ups from other users are designed with a dimmed background, providing clear and straightforward display. Users can also interact with those who posted thoughts through likes and comments, enhancing social attributes and making users feel that they are not reading alone, reinforcing the slogan “Let reading no longer be lonely.” Finally, at the surface layer, button design maintains consistency—for instance, the thought button appears throughout various interfaces, and users immediately associate it with social functions upon seeing it.

It is worth noting that during interviews, some users felt that the reading leaderboard based on reading time could cause reading anxiety and even peer pressure due to the large number of WeChat acquaintances among friends, resulting in a poor reading experience: “Especially when I see classmates and roommates around me reading many books while I have no desire to read during this period, it puts pressure on me. I can’t help but look at it and then feel anxious. Actually, I’m really a bit scared of the reading leaderboard now. Although it can be turned off, after having had this experience and operation before, I feel that it still brings some residual impact and anxiety when I use WeChat Reading.” (S1)

4.3 Interactive Sharing Under the Intertwining of Acquaintance and Stranger Social Networks

Social relationships in WeChat Reading exhibit the strong and weak tie distinctions defined by Granovetter: “strong tie” relationships built with WeChat friends and “weak tie” relationships built with strangers. During interviews, it became apparent that strong and weak ties have differential impacts on people’s behaviors and experiences in WeChat Reading App.

From the scope layer perspective, WeChat Reading App distinguishes interface functions for acquaintance socializing and stranger socializing: the “Small Circle” representing interest-based stranger social circles and “Friends’ Thoughts” representing acquaintance social circles. In both interfaces, users can view others’ thoughts and perform affirmative social operations such as liking, comment-

ing, and forwarding. More importantly, both interfaces feature functions for users to post and share thoughts, but with differences: the specific functions provided for sharing thoughts in “Small Circle” are fewer than those in the “Friends’ Thoughts” interface. For example, in “Friends’ Thoughts,” users can share thoughts on books they are currently reading, a function not available in “Small Circle”; however, thoughts posted in “Small Circle” can be synchronized to “Friends’ Thoughts.” This reflects a functional distinction between stranger socializing based on weak tie relationships and acquaintance socializing based on strong tie relationships.

At the structure layer, user interaction in both interfaces is relatively convenient. By clicking the “Discover” button in the bottom navigation, users can selectively enter either interface. Clicking on a thought posted by a user allows direct interaction, and when users want to share, clicking the button in the upper right corner enters the thought editing interface, conforming to conventional social interface interaction patterns.

At the skeleton and surface layers, both interfaces adopt an information flow design, with dark bottom lines separating each user’s thought and option buttons at the bottom of each thought card for interacting with others. The “Small Circle” interface features a prominently displayed circular button at the top, serving as a shortcut to enter circles the user has joined. At the surface layer, both interfaces use circular icon and button designs. When multiple icons appear in the same interface, visual balance must be maintained overall, as circles of the same size appear smaller visually than squares.

Meanwhile, stranger socializing and acquaintance socializing in WeChat Reading App bring different experiences and meanings to users. Building upon the app’s existing attribute and functional distinctions, this study’s in-depth interviews revealed that the vast majority of respondents exhibit “desensitization” toward strangers—in stranger socializing, users actually feel more secure and have a stronger desire for expression. Therefore, it is worth considering adding more sharing functions and information in Small Circle. As respondent S9 stated: “Strangers are different from WeChat friends who have real-life connections. In an unfamiliar environment, it is easier to let down one’s inner boundaries and express oneself bravely.”

5. Research Discussion

This study examines the reading experiences and meanings of WeChat Reading App users from the perspective of social reading, using the five elements of user experience as a logical framework and employing in-depth interviews. Returning to the earlier research questions, as a “reading + social” mobile reading application, WeChat Reading App’s social attributes are manifested in three aspects: self-presentation on personal homepages, the “sense of companionship” during reading, and interactive sharing under the intertwining of acquaintance and stranger social networks. The five elements of user experience are used to specif-

ically analyze the unique usage experiences brought by each functional module and interface. The practical implications for digital reading products in the social reading era, drawn from the above conclusions, are that user reading needs are no longer limited to information acquisition but extend to experiencing life, obtaining good services and experiences, and fulfilling emotional, social, and self-actualization needs. Therefore, good digital reading products should not only satisfy users' basic reading needs but also go beyond them, meeting users' social and emotional needs in every detail of reading—from macro-level product positioning to micro-level detail design—making users perceive the product as usable and easy to use.

In exploring the meaning of WeChat Reading App's social attributes for users, or examining the relationship between reading and social interaction from the user's standpoint, the interviews revealed contrasting behaviors. One respondent completely treated WeChat Reading as social software, setting up decoy bookshelves and frequently liking WeChat friends' reading updates, especially those of colleagues and supervisors. In his words: "I don't treat it (WeChat Reading App) as reading software. For me, it's just another extension of WeChat Moments." In contrast, another user rejected social attributes entirely, wishing only to be a "lurker" on the platform. However, what real value does the "performance" bring to users who treat reading purely as social interaction? And can users who want to read in a "vacuum" truly ignore all friends' reading information while embedded in social relationships? Regarding the relationship between reading and social interaction, what needs to be discussed now is not a zero-sum issue, but rather how we can preserve the "pure land" in our hearts as reading gradually becomes socialized. Aristotle believed that "man is by nature a social animal"; similarly, individuals in networks are not only lonely information processors but also socialized beings [9]. They are not only seeking information but also seeking belonging, recognition, and support [10]. This study's exploration of the meanings users obtain through WeChat Reading App's social attributes actually aims to find a gap for users in the network where reading and social interaction intertwine—a gap that also needs to be seen and optimized by platform operators and even society as a whole. It is as if the hedgehog theory from interpersonal relationships could be applied here: interactions between people require appropriate distance—too far apart to keep each other warm, too close and they risk hurting each other. Similarly, in reading, social tools should be used moderately, maintaining appropriate interpersonal distance [11].

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