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Research on WeChat Official Account Operations for Book Marketing: A Case Study of “Unread” Postprint

Authors: Wang Suqi

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Abstract

The renowned cultural brand Weidu was established in June 2014. As an emerging brand that grew up in the new media era, Weidu attaches great importance to the utilization of self-media platforms such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu, and its book marketing self-media accounts have also achieved significant competitive advantages among many similar accounts. This paper examines the articles recently published on the “Weidu” WeChat Official Account, and further investigates the strengths and weaknesses of its content and marketing based on content analysis. By utilizing the framework of the 4I theory of online marketing, it proposes optimization suggestions for its future operational development.

Full Text

Preamble

A Study on the Operation of WeChat Official Accounts for Marketing Branded Books: The Case of “Unread”

(Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing 102600)

Abstract: The renowned cultural brand “Unread” was established in June 2014. As an emerging brand that has grown in the new media era, Unread places great emphasis on utilizing self-media platforms such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu, and its book marketing accounts have achieved significant competitive advantages among similar accounts. This paper examines recent articles published on the “Unread” WeChat official account, further exploring the account’s content and marketing strengths and weaknesses through content analysis. Using the framework of the 4I theory of online marketing, it proposes optimization suggestions for its future operation and development.

Keywords: Unread; WeChat Official Account; Book Marketing; 4I Theory

WeChat is a social application launched by Tencent in 2011. After more than a decade of continuous development, its functionality has grown increasingly sophisticated, establishing itself as an indispensable communication tool in modern life and one of today's most influential new media platforms. The WeChat Public Platform, launched in August 2012, is open to individuals, organizations, and enterprises for publishing information and conducting one-to-many communication campaigns. Together with WeChat chat and Moments, the Public Platform forms a trinity of strong-tie communication loops. With the subsequent introduction of mini-programs and WeChat stores that can be integrated with the platform, it has provided numerous conveniences for corporate e-commerce activities, gradually evolving into a multi-functional commercial ecosystem connecting corporate users and consumers.

Like other industries, the publishing industry favors official accounts for their low cost, simple operation, precise push capabilities, and strong-relationship communication. Major publishing houses, book companies, and publishing brands have almost all registered accounts on the WeChat Public Platform to conduct online marketing. High-quality publishing official accounts that are carefully operated can not only increase book sales but also expand brand awareness and disseminate brand culture in the new media field. The research case selected in this paper, "Unread," is one such example.

1. Content Analysis of the "Unread" Official Account

"Unread" is the WeChat official account registered in the same year the eponymous cultural brand was established, used to carry out operations and book marketing activities. According to the publishing institution new media influence index ranking released by Publishing People magazine in cooperation with Beijing Shuku Technology Co., Ltd., the "Unread" official account's reading index ranking has consistently remained in the TOP 30 in the annual book company list from 2017 to 2021.

This paper takes the content of articles published by the "Unread" WeChat official account during the four-month period from August 1 to November 30, 2022, as a sample. It observes dimensions such as article push quantity, timing, and composition, and organizes the recent operation status of the "Unread" official account through data analysis as follows.

1.1 Push Quantity and Timing

The "Unread" WeChat official account published a total of 104 articles during the four-month period, with an average of 26 articles per month. It pushed articles on 81 days, averaging about 20 publishing days per month. In terms of single push quantity, the account typically publishes 1 or 2 articles daily, with single-article pushes being the majority, accounting for over 70%.

Regarding timing, the “Unread” official account irregularly stops updating on weekdays but rarely skips more than two consecutive days. On non-working days, it usually pushes articles on Sundays and seldom updates on Saturdays. The account’s publishing times are not completely fixed, but there is a clear peak period: 6:00 PM to 8:00 PM, during which articles are published on about 74% of publishing days. Other publishing periods include 12:00 PM to 2:00 PM (12%) and 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM (10%).

1.2 Article Composition

From August to November, a total of 49 articles pushed by the “Unread” official account were certified as original, accounting for 47% of all articles. However, considering that some articles in the “Weekend Fortune” series cannot be certified as original due to their short length, the actual original rate should be around 60%.

The “Unread” WeChat official account takes book promotion as its main purpose. Nearly 60% of the articles are recommendations for books produced by its own brand, though the recommendation methods vary. Another three articles are joint reading lists for children’s books, music themes, and women’s themes, recommended in cooperation with other publishing brands. Additionally, 26% of the tweets are used for event introductions, including but not limited to member days, Double Eleven, and promotions for slightly flawed books.

The “Unread” official account currently has two continuously updated series—“Weekend Fortune” and “Weekend Deep Read.” The “Fortune” series consists of short tweets published every Friday, accounting for 14%. The “Deep Read” series strives to provide more valuable content that triggers deeper thinking within the scope of fragmented reading. Compared with “Fortune” tweets, these are more difficult to create, so it has not maintained weekly publication, releasing only 9 articles during the four months, accounting for about 9% of the total.

1.3 Content Presentation Methods

The most common content presentation methods for WeChat official accounts are pure text and text-image combinations. To enrich presentation forms and enhance reader experience, many official accounts now also incorporate videos, audio, and external links.

The “Unread” official account uses external links extensively. Almost every marketing article has embedded image links that redirect to product pages on the micro-store “Unread Selection” or Dangdang’s self-operated store, allowing direct purchase of recommended books.

Adding animated GIFs to the “Weekend Fortune” series is a distinctive feature: “fortune-telling” images are made into animated GIFs through rapid scrolling playback, allowing readers to screenshot and draw lots, thereby improving content interactivity and fun.

However, the account rarely uses video and audio. Only three tweets incorporate video formats (including two reposts), and no articles have included audio.

1.4 Book Recommendation Formats

The “Unread” official account adopts diversified forms to recommend books. It not only publishes conventional marketing articles but also integrates book recommendations into various tweets: monthly member day tweets focus on introducing one “Unread Book”; Double Eleven discount activity announcements also provide readers with “bargain hunting” booklists; “Deep Read” series articles revolve around specific book themes, with book recommendations following naturally.

Among the 58 book recommendation articles, 38 introduce only one book throughout, using methods such as pre-mention, in-text mention, end-listing, or full-introduction. Articles recommending multiple books mostly use full introduction with only a brief opening.

2. Strengths and Weaknesses of “Unread” Official Account Operation

2.1 Content Aspects

As the statistical data in the “Article Composition” section shows, more than half of the articles in the “Unread” official account are book marketing soft articles. However, purely in terms of content, these articles do not alienate readers. Represented by the “Deep Read” series, many tweets provide high-quality reading content, either quoted from original books or introducing publication background stories. After removing the book promotion sections, the overall reading value remains intact, allowing the articles to stand alone and provide readers with a better experience.

In content planning, the “Unread” official account effectively leverages hot events to gain attention. A few hours before the Qatar World Cup began in November, “Unread” published “Bold Prediction: Who Will Win This World Cup?” introducing veteran and new players, reviewing classic World Cup moments, and incidentally recommending *Why Football?* from Unread’s “Thinker” series (2018). Two more football-themed tweets followed on November 25 and 27.

However, compared with predictable hot events, “Unread’s” response to unpredictable events is relatively slow. Regarding Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan, the official account published “How War Changes a Country’s History” five days later. Additionally, using Pelosi’s visit as a lead to forcibly introduce *The Victory of Rome* reflects the problem of associating book promotion with irrelevant themes.

2.2 Marketing Aspects

Most book brands use promotions to increase sales. Unread’s promotional activities include special pre-sales, limited-time offers, and holiday discounts. Product bundling is also commonly used, with “Unread” often selling “book + book” or “book + merchandise” combinations. By optimizing the breadth, depth, and relevance of product combinations, enterprises can enhance competitiveness and achieve better economic benefits [1].

Beyond conventional methods, Unread has conducted various unconventional book marketing activities. For example, the second annual “Take Flawed Books Home” event allows readers to purchase slightly flawed books at low prices while preventing inventory books from being destroyed. Although this brings little direct revenue, it helps shape a brand image that cherishes books and has cultural values. Another example is the “Flash Mob Group” for Suede bassist Matt Osman’s debut *The Day of Fame*, where the author joined group chats with participants who purchased the book. This novel activity strongly appeals to readers and fans, with simple participation that effectively drives sales.

However, the “Unread” WeChat official account still suffers from a strong marketing feel, primarily due to the density of book promotion implants. Among the 104 observed tweets, 79 (over 75%) involve book promotion, including pure recommendations, promotional announcements, and articles with implanted ads. This high-density promotion affects the impact of quality content and reduces user closeness and trust in the brand.

3. Optimization Strategies for “Unread” Official Account Operation

In 2015, the “Unread” WeChat official account surpassed 300,000 followers, leading the publishing industry [2]. In 2017, it ranked third in the annual book company new media influence index. However, as more publishing institutions entered new media, “Unread” failed to maintain its initial first-mover advantage, with its ranking declining yearly to 22nd in 2021. While still competitive overall, “Unread” must take action to reverse this trend.

American scholar Don Schultz proposed the 4I network integrated marketing theory in the 1990s. The four “I”s—Interesting (fun), Interests (benefits), Interaction, and Individuality (personality)—emphasize shifting from sender-centered to receiver-centered marketing, making it more suitable for new media communication patterns than traditional theories [3]. Based on the 4I theory and analysis of leading book brand marketing accounts, this paper proposes four optimization suggestions for the “Unread” WeChat official account.

3.1 Individuality: Expand Personalized Content, Reduce “Marketing Feel”

Throughout recent “Unread” tweets, book promotion appears everywhere, making it difficult to find articles completely unrelated to books. While book promotion aligns with the account’s positioning, publishing institutions should not only aim to “sell books” but also take a long-term perspective, using new media accounts across platforms to build brand image and demonstrate brand personality, values, and unique culture to consumers.

The book brand Imaginist (理想国) serves as a reference. With the publishing concept “Imagine Another Possibility,” it develops core business while expanding into creative products, media, salons, and lectures, striving to become a more inclusive, forward-looking cultural brand [4]. Consequently, the “Imaginist” WeChat official account occasionally publishes articles on film, music, and other topics beyond book marketing, reducing marketing feel while maintaining brand tone.

Like Imaginist, Unread is a mass publisher but emphasizes different areas, with strengths in popular science, art, and lifestyle books. The “Unread” official account could adopt Imaginist’s approach, adding non-marketing articles on topics like science trivia or life tips to create a personalized series.

3.2 Interesting: Use Short Articles to Create a Relaxed Atmosphere

The fun principle uses online media to focus on audience psychology, implementing marketing strategies through interesting, knowledgeable content [5]. A publishing company account that applies this well is “Booklist Coming” under Dooku Culture, which uses its panda mascot “Panda Jun” to write first-person tweets with quirky, humorous style.

However, the “Unread” official account has established its own familiar style, making drastic changes inappropriate. Still, “Booklist Coming” offers learnable elements—short tweets. Its short tweets contain only one sentence, creating absurdist humor through titles and content that attracts clicks and comments. For example, the December 1 article “Age is getting old, this bowl of youth” opened to reveal “Can only eat 80% full,” achieving 31,000 views. While extreme in length, this short-article approach suits “Unread.” Among 81 publishing days, 23 days had two articles. When both are long, total length may exceed fragmented reading tolerance. Combining long and short tweets could work: long tweets emphasize knowledge while short ones provide light content, potentially integrating with the personalized series mentioned above.

3.3 Interests: Simplify Menu Design, Improve Service Convenience

Internet marketing theory emphasizes user-centricity and maximizing audience needs satisfaction. Book WeChat marketing, backed by technical platforms,

should provide better services when official account functions are fully developed and reasonably utilized.

For book brand official account audiences, beyond daily pushes, active searches typically seek new book information or themed booklists. In the “Unread” official account, users must first click the unclearly labeled “See Through Me” among three primary menus (“See Through Me,” “Come Buy Books,” “Come Flirt with Me”), then select “Article Intensive Reading” from four secondary menus, and finally navigate to tertiary menus to find “Booklist” and “Unread New Books”—highly inconvenient for new readers. While official accounts should reflect brand personality, compromising functionality for personalization is counterproductive.

The “New Classics” official account offers a better model with simple, elegant primary menus: “Past Selections,” “Reading Recommendations,” and “Join Us,” facilitating easy access to book information and curated topic-based articles. “Unread” should simplify its menu structure, at least elevating commonly used functions like “Booklist” and “Unread New Books” to secondary menus.

3.4 Interaction: Increase Interaction Forms, Encourage Reader Participation

New media audience behavior has evolved from single point-to-point models to multi-to-many broadcast and face-to-face interactive communication models [6]. Following this shift, WeChat book marketing should provide more feedback channels and increase reader participation.

“Unread” values user interaction, actively building online communities and holding group reading activities that provide platforms for readers to communicate with each other and even editors, enhancing participant loyalty. However, ensuring community activity requires participants to meet specific conditions: reading groups require finishing books on schedule, weekly #ReadingNotes check-ins (minimum 200 words), and an approximately 800-word book review upon completion [1]. While fan and activity communities require shared consciousness, responsibility, and rituals to ensure participant experience, only a minority of followers are willing to cross these thresholds. Therefore, besides lowering interaction barriers, “Unread” should add lower-cost interaction methods (such as comment section lotteries) to deepen fans’ emotional connection with the brand.

The “Unread” WeChat official account has operated for eight years, developing stable styles in article arrangement, push timing, and advertising integration, maintaining strong competitiveness among similar accounts. However, it remains in development with operational issues to address and room for marketing improvement. In fierce competition among book brand accounts, “Unread” should learn from leading accounts’ successes to achieve sustainable development.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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