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DOCTORAL THESIS

Organizational socialization via WeChat: affordances and paradoxical outcomes of the professional use of social networking mobile applications

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have paid increased attention to the impact of social technologies on organizational communication but have yet to explore how their use has influenced organizational socialization, a process in which organizational newcomers transition into the organization. To fill this gap, this thesis investigates the use of social networking applications, a type of social technology, and its relation to three key processes in organizational socialization: information seeking, identity work, and workplace relationship development. Drawing on the concepts of affordance and paradox, this thesis examines how technological features and human factors such as mobile communication culture, technological frames of users, and organizational contexts shape processes of using social networking applications during organizational entry.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Chinese organizational newcomers regarding their experience of using WeChat, the most popular social networking mobile application in China. Findings suggest that WeChat provides communicative opportunities that are otherwise not available in other communication platforms or channels. The participants obtain official and unofficial information from using WeChat. In addition to conventional, direct information seeking, the participants rely on persistence of information afforded by WeChat to indirectly access information. The participants seek information about identity expectations through indirect methods such as observation and experiment with their provisional identities using WeChat Moments. Details of mundane everyday work life and achievements are the most frequently mentioned content for identity construction. For workplace relationship development, the participants develop metaknowledge of their coworkers through browsing their

coworkers' posts from WeChat Moments. WeChat work groups provide opportunities for newcomers to initiate and develop relationships with their coworkers with low social costs.

Despite that WeChat provides lots of benefits, the participants describe WeChat as a problematic tool in that they could be trapped in paradoxical situations when they are concerned with engagement in organizational communication flows, construction of flexible identities, genres of professional communication enabled by WeChat, and blurred boundaries between professional and personal life. Dealing with these paradoxes provides opportunities for newcomers to learn technology culture of their organizations, reflect on their technological frames, and adjust their expectations and behaviors with respect to WeChat use. This technologically occasioned learning is an unexpected outcome of responding to the paradoxes of using WeChat during organizational entry.

This thesis extends organizational communication research to provide an initial exploration of the use of social technologies in organizational socialization, uncovering how social networking sites and applications both enable and constrain information seeking, identity work, and workplace relationship development. It also provides insights into how various individual, interpersonal, and organizational factors influence the perceived affordances of social networking mobile applications and how these factors interact to shape the paradoxical user experience. With their wide adoption in the contemporary workplace, social networking sites and applications have huge potential to help newcomers transition into new organizations and have become an important aspect in organizational socialization. By learning and adapting to the norms of use for social networking sites and applications in new organizations and making

sense of paradoxes in their user experience, newcomers can begin to understand the technology culture of their new organization. This thesis argues that it is necessary to reconceptualize organizational socialization, taking into consideration distinctive processes enabled and constrained by social technologies, and to reflect upon how organizational tactics and the design of social technologies can help newcomers to learn, to adapt, and to thrive in their organizations.

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