Making Sense of WeChat Vernacular Affordances in Border Crossing

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ICTs and globalization have integrated the digital space into the networked pattern of place fluidity and continuality. Within the framework of migration as a process, acculturation has always been the challenge for these newcomers to adapt into a new environment. In theory, mass-media based cross-cultural adaption theories seemingly fail to elucidate the adaption via digitalized platform. Practically, most studies have explored the migrant workers and their acculturation in the patterns of international and internal migration. However, this dichotomy does not fully reflect the patterns of migration. Mainland Chinese labor migrants in Macau are a special case. Though their migration is closely tied up with crossing the border, mainland workers' migration has occurred within one country (China) since 1999 when Macau was successfully handed over to China. When they cross the Zhuhai-Macau border, dual migrants are exposed to a more diversified social media environment.

This paper, taking the approach of social media ethnography, explores the vernacular affordances of WeChat (a social networking site designed for mobile phones) in the cross-border life of mainland Chinese migrant workers. In this study, 24 low-skilled Chinese dual migrants took part in in-depth interviews and group discussions to illustrate their use of social media. Meanwhile, how participants interact with and within WeChat was observed and recorded to exemplify the impacts of social media on adaption. The findings have revealed that WeChat can function as a digital mediated space providing these migrants with forms of communal solidarity, social interactions, access to information and in some cases economic benefits in their often precarious existence.

Keywords: Vernacular affordances, WeChat, social media ethnography, mainland Chinese dual migrants