

The Development and Communication Characteristics of WeChat Official Accounts in China

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Abstract

With the rapid development of mobile Internet, the forms and types of media have undergone significant changes. As a new type of media form based on the WeChat Public Platform, WeChat Official Accounts have penetrated all aspects of social life. Relying on its "strong relationship" communication characteristics, WeChat Official Accounts have become an ideal platform for enterprises, media, government agencies, and individuals to explore self-media practices. In terms of communication characteristics, WeChat Official Accounts integrates multiple communication models. These changes are mainly reflected in the reinforcement of real-life "strong linkages" between users during the development of WeChat, the applicability and reconstruction of the Agenda-Setting Theory in WeChat Official Account communication, the reinforcement of the Opinion Leader Theory in WeChat Official Accounts, and the dissolution of the "spiral of silence" theory in the private communication environment of WeChat Official Accounts.

Keywords: WeChat Official Accounts; Development Process; Communication Characteristics

Introduction

With the rapid development of Internet technology, particularly the increasing popularity of mobile Internet, new media forms have emerged continuously, gradually altering people's methods of obtaining information

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and causing profound changes in China's social media landscape (Cui, 2022). WeChat Official Accounts, launched by Tencent on the WeChat platform in August 2012, have quickly become an important carrier for social media communication in China. They meet people's needs for high-quality and personalized content and provide content creators with a platform to showcase themselves and share knowledge (Huang, 2015).

The development of WeChat Official Accounts is closely linked to the social needs of China. With the popularity of smartphones and the convenience of mobile Internet, people's information needs have become increasingly diverse, and traditional information dissemination methods can no longer meet the demands of modern society. With their strong user base, rich interactive functions, and precise information push mechanisms, WeChat Official Accounts have become a new channel for information dissemination. They break through the limitations of time and space, making information dissemination more precise and efficient and providing a new platform for interaction and communication between individuals, enterprises, and institutions (Chen, 2022).

In China, WeChat Official Accounts have become more than just a social tool; they have profoundly impacted the structure of information dissemination, communication models, and the interactive relationship between enterprises and users (Cui, 2022). WeChat Official Accounts are characterized by diversified communication subjects, a one-to-many communication system structure, fragmented content, substantial interactive audiences, and precise push and personalized services (Li, 2024). These characteristics have enabled WeChat Official Accounts to play a significant role in information dissemination, commercial operations, and cultural exchanges, with a far-reaching impact on social public opinion. At the same time, they provide high-quality content and diversified services to optimize user experience and meet the audience's psychological, social, and self-actualization needs (Liang, 2024).

Therefore, research on the development process and communication characteristics of WeChat official accounts in China helps understand the evolution of new media platforms and provides strategic guidance for

content creators and enterprise marketers. This research also contributes to a deeper understanding of social media platforms and digital communication technologies, exploring how to use refined communication strategies to interact more effectively with the audience and improve communication effectiveness.

Scholars have noted that WeChat Official Accounts have evolved from subscription-based to service and enterprise accounts, thereby forming a rich content ecosystem and diverse business models (Zhao, 2019). With continuous technological progress and changing user needs, WeChat Official Accounts are constantly exploring new functions and forms, such as mini-programs and video accounts, to adapt to the development trends of the mobile Internet era (Zeng, 2022). Compared with traditional media, the content of WeChat Official Accounts is characterized by segmentation, verticalization, and specialization (Cui, 2022). Although WeChat Official Accounts have achieved significant success, they face many challenges during development. Current research generally focuses on challenges such as content homogenization, slowing user growth, and tightening regulatory policies (Gao, 2024). Corresponding countermeasures and suggestions have been proposed, including strengthening content innovation, enhancing user experience, and refining operational models to adapt to market changes and user needs (Wang, 2021).

Scholars have also noted that WeChat Official Accounts exhibit significant characteristics, including diversified communication subjects, fragmented communication content, interactive communication methods, and precise communication effects (Li, 2024). Personalized push can enhance audience stickiness and improve communication efficiency and influence. The communication characteristics of WeChat Official Accounts are text-based but fully integrate various forms of content display, such as video, audio, and images, making information dissemination richer and more three-dimensional (Chen, 2020). This feature enhances the user experience and increases the breadth of content attractiveness and dissemination. There are three major laws in the information dissemination of WeChat Official Accounts: the power-law relationship between reading

quantity and time, the positive correlation between user communication behavior and information attractiveness, and the influence of communication probability by the user's social circle (Xu, 2019).

In summary, although research on the development process and communication characteristics of WeChat Official Accounts in China has yielded specific results, the exploration of the development process of WeChat Official Accounts lacks a comprehensive approach. The research on its communication characteristics primarily focuses on case analysis and operational strategies, with few in-depth analyses of mechanisms and discussions on communication characteristics using communication theories. Therefore, this study integrates communication theories such as the strong linkage relationship theory, agenda-setting theory, opinion leader theory, and spiral of silence theory to deeply explore the development process and communication characteristics of WeChat Official Accounts in China, aiming to provide new insights and perspectives for theoretical research and practical applications in related fields.

Research Objectives

1. Research on the Development Process of WeChat Official Accounts
2. Research on the Communication Characteristics of WeChat Official Accounts

Theories and Methods

This paper employs qualitative research methods, including in-depth case analysis and interviews. Through case analysis, representative WeChat Official Accounts are selected to examine their development processes, content strategies, user interactions, business models, and the reasons behind their success or failure. In addition, in-depth interviews are conducted with key individuals, including WeChat Official Account operators, industry experts, and scholars, to understand their perspectives on the development of WeChat Official Accounts, the challenges and opportunities they face, and future development trends. These interviews

provide first-hand data to support the in-depth analysis and conclusion of the study.

This paper examines the application and embodiment of the "strong relationship" theory in the development process of WeChat Official Accounts. It also studies the changes in traditional communication theories reflected in the new communication ecology of WeChat Official Accounts. These changes are mainly manifested in the applicability and reconstruction of the Agenda-Setting Theory in WeChat Official Account communication, the reinforcement of the Opinion Leader Theory based on the real-life "strong linkages" between communicators and users, and the dissolution of the "spiral of silence" theory in the private communication environment of WeChat Official Accounts.

Research Findings

This paper's research findings are divided into two parts, aiming to comprehensively and deeply study the development process and communication characteristics of WeChat Official Accounts.

4.1 Development Process and Trends of WeChat Official Accounts

4.1.1 Birth Period

On August 17, 2012, the WeChat Public Platform was officially launched for ordinary users, marking the introduction of WeChat Official Accounts. Subsequently, on August 23, 2012, the WeChat Public Platform was officially launched, initially named "Official Account Platform/Media Platform" (Wang, 2024). Relying on WeChat's nearly 600 million users, the platform quickly rose to prominence. Moreover, the strong relationship-based social and sharing mechanism of WeChat Moments significantly propelled the development of the public platform. Under the "strong relationship" theory framework, the point-to-point communication model can effectively enhance communication effectiveness, ensuring that information is directly and accurately delivered to the target audience (Mao, 2017). Audiences often hold higher trust in information from acquaintances or long-followed official accounts, making them more likely to be persuaded and receptive. This information dissemination method,

based on trust and emotional bonds, makes the diffusion of information both efficient and extensive.

At this stage, the functions of WeChat Official Accounts were relatively simple, primarily focused on information dissemination. However, they still attracted many content creators and enterprises to participate, forming a preliminary content dissemination system. In November 2012, the group push system of the WeChat Public Platform underwent a comprehensive upgrade, adding the functions of editing graphic and text messages, thereby enriching the content form of official accounts (Chen et al., 2023). At the same time, official media accounts such as "CCTV News" and "Reference News" were also born successively, injecting new vitality into the development of official accounts.

4.1.2 Incubation Period

On August 5, 2013, WeChat launched Enterprise Accounts (later known as Service Accounts) and Subscription Accounts, targeting different types of users (Han et al., 2022). Subscription Accounts were primarily designed for individuals and media users to disseminate information. At the same time, Enterprise Accounts were more oriented towards businesses, offering more commercial functions such as customer service and payment interfaces. The messages of Subscription Accounts were folded, marking the beginning of differentiated management of different types of official accounts by the WeChat Public Platform. On April 15, 2014, to enhance the service capabilities of official accounts, the number of group messages for all Service Accounts was increased from once a month to four times a month. In July 2014, the WeChat Public Platform first disclosed the "number of reads" and "likes" of articles, enriching the backend data (Han et al., 2022). This provided a measurable value standard for the content of official accounts, allowing operators to understand the popularity of their content more intuitively. Under the "strong relationship" theory, in-depth communication and trust-building are key to forming "strong relationships." With such a platform, WeChat Official Accounts enabled audiences to express their views and opinions through comments and messages, fostering closer and more lasting trust

between audiences and operators. On July 7, 2014, the WeChat Public Platform introduced a promotion function, enabling official accounts to apply to become advertisers and traffic owners, thereby providing new monetization methods for operators (Chen et al., 2023).

4.1.3 Growth Period

On January 22, 2015, WeChat Official Accounts introduced the Original Statement function (Bai & Xie, 2016), safeguarding the rights of original creators and promoting the production of high-quality content. Subsequently, on August 11, 2015, the "Appreciation" function was invited for internal testing (Fang et al., 2024), further upgrading the original protection mechanism. To some extent, Tencent's daily limit on the number of group messages for WeChat Official Accounts "forced" the operators to produce high-quality content. Since the number of group messages was limited, operators were compelled to select the most suitable content from their database for dissemination (Huang, 2015). Under the "strong relationship" theory, audiences expect valuable, in-depth content from trusted sources. Therefore, WeChat's official accounts motivated content creators to innovate in order to meet audience expectations continually.

Between 2015 and 2017, WeChat's official accounts gradually expanded their functions, including group messages, template messages, and WeChat Pay. These functions laid the foundation for the commercialization of the platform, transforming it from a mere information dissemination tool to a multifunctional platform for business marketing, social interaction, and user services (Zeng Lu, Fujian, 2024). "Ten Points Reading," originally a personal Weibo account named "Daily Book Recommendations" by Lin Binwei, had already accumulated two to three hundred thousand followers by 2012. However, it struggled to establish a matching profit model due to the lack of a sustainable monetization model. In 2012, "Daily Book Recommendations" migrated to the WeChat platform and was later renamed "Ten Points Reading." Compared to the short texts on Weibo, the WeChat Official Account supports long-form content, allowing for more in-depth articles. When the user base of the

Ten Points Reading official account surpassed 500,000, it adhered to the brand philosophy of "accompanying you in reading at ten o'clock at night," thereby creating a warm reading environment for the night. The content focused on family emotions, career education, social hotspots, classic interpretations, biographies, and other topics, with almost every article achieving over 100,000 reads.

During this period, WeChat Official Accounts experienced a peak in "content creation" and "traffic dividends." With the influx of content creators, WeChat Official Accounts became the leading platform for self-media, covering multiple fields such as news, entertainment, education, and technology. The commercial value of official accounts was widely recognized, and many enterprises began to use WeChat Official Accounts for brand promotion, product marketing, and user retention. Social e-commerce also began to emerge during this stage. Official accounts were no longer limited to text-based content. However, they included various forms of content dissemination, such as video, audio, and live streaming, gradually forming a diversified information dissemination ecosystem.

4.1.4 Stable Period

Unlike the viral dissemination models of Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin, WeChat Official Accounts rely on functions such as group message push, automatic replies, and one-on-one communication (Huang, 2015). Their dissemination mainly depends on the "strong relationship" between information push and user interaction. This singular dissemination method led WeChat to optimize the platform functions multiple times, introducing more intelligent tools such as smart recommendations and personalized pushes to enhance user experience and communication efficiency. On May 17, 2017, WeChat added the "Look Around" function. "Look Around" focuses more on the relevance and quality of content recommendations based on user interest tags, encouraging high-quality original authors to continue creating content on the WeChat platform (Chen et al., 2023). By August 26, 2019, the WeChat Public Platform had gathered over 20 million official accounts (Li, 2020). Many authors have established their brands

through original articles and videos, becoming entrepreneurs within the WeChat ecosystem.

With the continuous expansion of the user base, the commercialization process of WeChat Official Accounts also accelerated. Enterprises monetize through advertising, membership systems, knowledge payment, and other methods. In addition, functions within the WeChat ecosystem, such as "Moments Ads" and "Mini-Programs," further enhanced the commercial value of official accounts. At this time, content production and dissemination gradually shifted from extensive to refined management, and competition among official accounts became increasingly fierce. Operators of official accounts need to focus not only on user growth, the quality of content, and user stickiness, but also on maintaining a consistent brand identity. Community operations and precision marketing became new operational strategies. By establishing and maintaining "strong relationships," users were more willing to follow and interact with official accounts in the long term, building closer and more lasting trust relationships and enhancing brand influence. This trust relationship attracted a broader audience, increasing user loyalty and satisfaction with the brand.

4.1.5 Challenge Period

With the continuous advancement of technology, readers' reading habits are characterized by a superficial depth of reading, rapid reading speed, and recreational reading purposes. There are many reasons for these habits, including the explosion of information in the mobile Internet era, the diverse online choices available to users, the convenience of mobile phones, user dependency, and even the fragmented time and noisy environments in which users read WeChat articles (Qin, 2022). Against this backdrop, various new content media platforms and WeChat Official Accounts compete to capture users' attention and time in content consumption. Against this backdrop, content information platforms such as Toutiao, Penguin, Dayu, Baijia, and Zhihu are dividing the market share of the content information field; video publishing platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Bilibili have effectively diverted traffic from WeChat

Official Accounts in the entertainment content field through video media; at the same time, picture-based social platforms such as Weibo and Xiaohongshu are also highly popular among users, significantly diverting traffic from WeChat Official Accounts.

WeChat Official Accounts have undergone multiple revisions and adjustments to cope with the traffic challenges. The platform has enhanced support for video and graphic content. On January 22, 2020, Tencent announced the internal testing of WeChat Video Accounts (Fang et al., 2024) and their deep integration, allowing users of WeChat Official Accounts to publish video content directly. In February 2023, WeChat Official Accounts introduced a "picture/text" publishing function, similar to Xiaohongshu (Fang et al., 2024), which enables creators to publish picture messages. Compared to the traditional graphic message mode, the new picture message mode significantly enhances the value of picture media. These changes indicate that WeChat's official accounts have gradually evolved into a highly diversified platform for content publishing and sharing.

In summary, WeChat official accounts have undergone multiple development stages from their inception to the present, evolving from a simple group messaging tool to a diversified content platform and a pioneer in exploring business models. The "strong relationship" theory has always been a core element throughout its development. In the future, with continuous technological progress and market changes, WeChat Official Accounts will continue to develop in the direction of greater intelligence and personalization.

4.2 Communication Characteristics and Impact Analysis of WeChat Official Accounts

4.2.1 The Applicability and Reconstruction of Agenda-Setting Theory in WeChat Official Account Communication

Agenda-Setting Theory, proposed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, posits that the media influences the public's focus on issues by selecting and emphasizing news content, thereby setting the agenda for public discussion (Hao, 2022). In essence, the media informs the public of what

is happening and guides them on what they should care about. This theory emphasizes the media's role in shaping public perception and attitudes by disseminating information.

In the context of WeChat Official Accounts, the Agenda-Setting Theory remains highly relevant. As a novel social media platform, WeChat's official accounts serve as a channel for disseminating information and influencing public attention and discussion topics through selective content pushes, well-designed articles, and interactive features. In this sense, WeChat Official Accounts act as agenda-setters for the public. The interactive nature of WeChat Official Accounts adds a new dimension to applying Agenda-Setting Theory. Users are not merely recipients of information but also active participants in its dissemination. Through interactions such as comments, likes, and shares, account operators can gather feedback and adjust their communication agendas accordingly. Users' participation makes them disseminators of information and indirectly influences public agendas. Users amplify the reach and impact of specific issues by sharing, commenting, and reposting.

The premise of WeChat Official Account communication is the selective subscription by WeChat users, who tend to follow accounts that align with their values and interests. These accounts, in turn, have their own positioning and target audiences, making the communication effects of user-driven subscriptions even more pronounced. The WeChat Official Accounts push mechanism enables operators to deliver personalized content tailored to users' interests, behaviors, and demographic characteristics. Operators can select and push content related to current hot topics, social discussions, and public sentiment trends. For instance, during certain social events, accounts may publish relevant reports, commentaries, or analyses to influence users' attention and emphasize the social significance of these events (Hao Qiang, Hangzhou, 2024). An example is a report titled "Monthly Salary of 13,000! Hangzhou Man Faces Layoff Just After Receiving Offer. A Few Months Ago, There Was a Hiring Frenzy; Now Even HR Has to Leave Reluctantly" published by the Qianjiang Evening News WeChat Official Account on June 15, 2021, which garnered

over 100,000 views. Amid the ongoing public discussion on the crackdown on online education in the second half of 2021, the Qianjiang Evening News account leveraged its sensitivity to hot topics by featuring perspectives from various professionals within the online education industry. The report critically analyzed the internal mechanisms of these institutions while also exploring the reasons behind the government's determination to regulate the sector, concluding with exclusive commentary from the newspaper's journalists. This selective content push helps shape public attention to specific issues.

While Agenda-Setting Theory remains applicable in WeChat Official Account communication, the fragmented reading habits of the new media era somewhat dilute its traditional functions. The convenience and immediacy of WeChat Official Accounts result in frequent and diverse content updates. Users inundated with a large volume of information quickly may struggle to understand and focus intensely on all issues. Additionally, the effects of agenda-setting may be influenced by the homogenization of content among official accounts and users' selective attention.

4.2.2 The Reinforcement of Opinion Leader Theory in WeChat Official Accounts

Opinion Leader Theory, proposed by social scholars Katz and Lazarsfeld, emphasizes that specific influential individuals (opinion leaders) significantly impact the attitudes and behaviors of others within their social circles. Opinion leaders typically possess extensive professional knowledge, access to valuable information resources, or significant social influence, enabling them to make substantial contributions to the acceptance, dissemination, and impact of information in specific fields or groups (Rehman et al., 2023). With the evolution of the media environment, the forms and influence of opinion leaders have also changed. In the era of social media, ordinary users can become opinion leaders by building personal brands. This diverse group of opinion leaders means that information dissemination no longer relies solely on traditional experts or authoritative figures.

In WeChat Official Account communication, the role of opinion leaders is crucial. Account operators, well-known bloggers, and industry experts are all considered influential opinion leaders. They use their authority, knowledge, or social capital to convey information and influence users' perceptions and behaviors on the platform. For example, the Shenzhen Health Commission's WeChat Official Account is an opinion leader in health communication, guiding public attention to important health issues and actively debunking false health information and rumors. On June 19, 2021, to raise awareness of the herpes viruses, the Shenzhen Health Commission account collaborated with Peking University Shenzhen Hospital and other medical institutions to produce videos. These videos covered the characteristics of herpes viruses, symptoms of infection, treatment methods, and preventive measures, significantly reducing the infection rate of herpes viruses. By proactively providing public health and medical knowledge, the account enhances public awareness of health, self-care, and disease prevention while curbing the spread of misinformation.

WeChat Official Accounts offer a new platform and channel for opinion leaders. Through high-quality content, opinion leaders establish authority and trust with users, engaging in real-time interactions that form strong linkages. Users can also interact with opinion leaders through comments, likes, and shares, deepening their strong connections. These relationships amplify the influence of opinion leaders, making their views and suggestions more relatable and persuasive.

4.2.3 The Weakening of the "Spiral of Silence" and the Possibility of Genuine Opinion Expression in WeChat Official Accounts

The "Spiral of Silence" Theory, proposed by German scholar Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in 1974, suggests that individuals' attitudes and behaviors in public discussions are influenced by social pressure. Faced with mainstream views, individuals holding dissenting opinions may choose silence out of fear of isolation, the gradual disappearance of diverse opinions, and the formation of a "spiral of silence" (Sohn, 2022).

However, with the rise of social media, especially the widespread use of WeChat Official Accounts, the traditional "spiral of silence" effect has gradually weakened. The mechanisms for expressing individual and group opinions and providing feedback have evolved in WeChat Official Account communication. Social media offers more voices and interactive channels, breaking the traditional media's one-way communication and control over public opinion. On the WeChat Official Account platform, individuals can freely express their views without fear of isolation or exclusion. This environment encourages individuals to express their genuine opinions. The platform's anonymity also protects users who hesitate to express their opinions.

The communication environment of WeChat Official Accounts is relatively private and confidential. Combined with the private and secretive nature of mobile media, individuals are more willing to express their opinions boldly. This significantly weakens the "spiral of silence" effect. In practice, each user's interaction with the account holder is a unique, linear communication path unaffected by the surrounding public opinion environment. Users can only leave private messages for the account holder and cannot view other users' comments. In this feedback process, users do not have to worry about being isolated by the masses or bearing the social responsibility for their words. They also do not face the pressure of conflict between "personal opinions" and "group opinions." As a result, people are more willing to express their views and reveal their authentic selves. Thus, the "spiral of silence" theory is weakened and, to a certain extent, even dissolved in this context.

Conclusion

Since its official launch in August 2012, WeChat Official Accounts have undergone various stages of development, including the birth period, incubation period, growth period, stable period, and challenge period. During the birth period, WeChat Official Accounts quickly rose to prominence, leveraging WeChat's massive user base and primarily focusing on information dissemination, thereby forming a preliminary content

dissemination system. With the continuous improvement and upgrading of functions, such as adding graphic and text message editing features and launching Enterprise and Subscription Accounts, WeChat Official Accounts entered the incubation period, beginning to segment and manage different types of accounts. During the growth period, WeChat Official Accounts welcomed a peak in "content creation" and "traffic dividends," becoming the leading platform for self-media, covering multiple fields, and gaining widespread commercial recognition. During the stable period, the platform optimized its functions and introduced intelligent tools to enhance user experience and communication efficiency further, thereby accelerating commercialization. However, in the challenge period, facing changes in user reading habits and competition from other new media platforms, WeChat Official Accounts must continuously innovate and upgrade to meet new challenges.

In terms of communication characteristics, WeChat Official Accounts also exhibit new changes. For example, the applicability and reconstruction of the Agenda-Setting Theory in WeChat Official Account communication enable accounts to guide audience attention and discussion directions through the selective distribution of content. The reinforcement of the Opinion Leader Theory in WeChat's official accounts suggests that account operators with influence and professional expertise can become trusted sources of information and references for their audiences. However, the "spiral of silence" theory is weakened in the private communication environment of WeChat Official Accounts, where audiences are more willing to express their views and attitudes without the influence of social pressure.

Discussion

This study finds that the development process of WeChat Official Accounts aligns with the development patterns of social media platforms mentioned in previous research (Zhao, 2019). In the early stages, WeChat Official Accounts quickly accumulated initial users by leveraging WeChat's

massive user base and attracted more content creators and enterprises by continuously upgrading and improving functions.

The conclusions drawn in this study regarding communication characteristics are consistent with those of previous research. For example, this study points out that (Ao, 2022). In essence, the media informs the public of what is happening and guides them on what they should care about. This theory emphasizes the media's role in shaping public perception and attitudes by disseminating information.

In the context of WeChat Official Accounts, the Agenda-Setting Theory remains highly relevant. As a novel social media platform, WeChat's official accounts serve as a channel for disseminating information and influencing public attention and discussion topics through selective content pushes, well-designed articles, and interactive features. In this sense, WeChat Official Accounts act as agenda-setters for the public. The interactive nature of WeChat Official Accounts adds a new dimension to applying Agenda-Setting Theory. Users are not merely recipients of information but also active participants in its dissemination. Through interactions such as comments, likes, and shares, account operators can gather feedback and adjust their communication agendas accordingly. Users' participation makes them disseminators of information and indirectly influences public agendas. Users amplify the reach and impact of specific issues by sharing, commenting, and reposting.

The premise of WeChat Official Account communication is the selective subscription by WeChat users, who tend to follow accounts that align with their values and interests. These accounts, in turn, have their own positioning and target audiences, making the communication effects of user-driven subscriptions even more pronounced. The WeChat Official Accounts push mechanism enables operators to deliver personalized content tailored to users' interests, behaviors, and demographic characteristics. Operators can select and push content related to current hot topics, social discussions, and public sentiment trends. For instance, during certain social events, accounts may publish relevant reports, commentaries, or analyses to influence users' attention and emphasize

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While Agenda-Setting Theory remains applicable in WeChat Official Account communication, the fragmented reading habits of the new media era somewhat dilute its traditional functions. The convenience and immediacy of WeChat Official Accounts result in frequent and diverse content updates. Users inundated with a large volume of information quickly may struggle to understand and focus intensely on all issues. Additionally, the effects of agenda-setting may be influenced by the homogenization of content among official accounts and users' selective attention.

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