

Replacement or Complement: A Niche Analysis of Weibo, RedNote, and TikTok

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Abstract: Using Dimmick's niche theory as a theoretical framework, this study investigated the competition among three social media platforms, Weibo, RedNote and TikTok, using the satisfaction and satisfaction opportunities obtained among them. In this study, an online questionnaire survey was conducted nationwide, and 565 valid questionnaires were collected. This study drew three conclusions from the data analysis: (1) This study revealed that RedNote and TikTok are generalists, whereas Weibo is a specialist. (2) Weibo and TikTok have the most intense competition, but the three social media platforms have different competitive advantages. Therefore, this study predicts that these three social media platforms can coexist in the Chinese market. (3) Among the three media, TikTok is the most competitive, RedNote is the second most competitive, and Weibo is the least competitive.

Keywords: Niche theory; Social media services; User satisfaction introduction

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1. Introduction

The position of social media in people's social lives is becoming increasingly important, and the user base and the time they spend on social platforms have been on the rise. According to the Global Digital Summary Report 2022, there are more than 4.62 billion social media users worldwide, and global internet users spend an average of 2.5 hours per day on social media, which is an increase of 2 minutes per day ^[1]. Weibo, RedNote and TikTok are social media platforms in China with hundreds of millions of users.

Media competition research can be broadly categorized into media substitution and media competition research based on niche theory, which actively explores whether new media and existing media are substitutes or complements when new media emerge ^[2]. While existing studies have provided theoretical frameworks for understanding media competition, they still exhibit significant limitations. Western-centric focus: The majority of research concentrates on Western social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), paying insufficient attention to the unique characteristics of China's localized social media ecosystem, such as algorithmic governance, cultural contexts, and policy constraints, thereby limiting the explanatory power of theories in non-Western contexts ^[3]. Over-reliance on single dimensions: Current analyses predominantly depend on isolated metrics (e.g., user scale or functional substitutability), lacking systematic integration of

multi-resource competition (content, users, technology, capital), which hinders a holistic understanding of dynamic inter-platform rivalries^[3]. Fragmented empirical studies on China: Research addressing competition among Chinese social media platforms remains fragmented, failing to establish a cross-platform comparative framework grounded in niche theory. Notably, there is limited in-depth exploration of competition mechanisms triggered by user group overlap and functional convergence^[3].

This study takes Weibo, RedNote and TikTok as research objects for the following reasons:

- (1) Although the three social platforms have different user positioning and content styles, the services of Weibo, RedNote and TikTok have overlapped with the development of the social media market. In terms of user profiles, both Weibo and RedNote have more than 50% female users, and the difference in the 26–35 age group is basically the same. This suggests that the main population of the current social market is similarly distributed on the two platforms^[4].
- (2) As open social media outlets, Weibo, RedNote and TikTok all have more than 200 million daily active users in China, and all three apps are at the top of the list, which is of high research value. According to niche theory^[5], when the resources used by groups of people overlap, these groups of people compete.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media niche, gratifications obtained and gratification opportunities

There is a connection between use and gratification theory and niche theory, as group competition is a natural mode of selection based on user choice for the survival of the fittest^[6]. In natural ecosystems, each organism has its own way of life and adapts to the environment in which it lives to survive. However, resources in the environment are limited, and only relatively good groups can win, so competition within or between groups is inevitable in the same market environment. Likewise, when competition is too intense for media to coexist in the same environment, media will find ways to adjust their positioning and differentiate themselves from other media to survive⁶. For example, Dimmick et al. argued that email and telephone coexist because users perceive email to better satisfy their gratification opportunities, while the telephone is more socially satisfying^[7].

Yang et al. (2023) reviewed the literature on social media and reported three main dimensions of satisfaction that people derive from social media use: cognitive and affective resources, social resources and service resources. The cognitive–emotional resources dimension includes satisfaction from information searching, relaxation, catching up on trends, and indulgence. The social resource dimension includes satisfaction from social interaction, social status and interpersonal relationships. The service resource dimension includes satisfaction from ease of use, tool utility, and richness. In addition, fulfilment opportunities are brought about mainly by efficiency, which is related to the unrestricted time and space of social media^[8].

Among the three social media platforms, microblogging has the longest online presence and is the social media platform with the most authoritative information, including the most official media outlets and online opinion leaders. In addition, microblogs involve text-based information dissemination, providing the fastest feedback and allowing for in-depth analyses of important issues^[5]. Therefore, microblogs are the most effective form of information dissemination among the three social media platforms. In contrast, RedNote information is more product-related and does not provide users with news or survey-based information^[9]. In addition, RedNote is based mainly on images and videos, with very little text-only information. Although information sharing on TikTok is also fast, almost all the information on TikTok is presented in videos, providing more entertaining information^[10]. TikTok is in the middle in terms of information satisfaction. Based on the above, we propose the following hypotheses.

2.1.1. Hypothesis H1a

With respect to information satisfaction, Weibo has greater niche breadth and competitive superiority scores than TikTok, which has greater niche breadth and competitive superiority than RedNote.

TikTok is a video-based social media platform; sharing videos through the platform attracts more people to visit it, leading it to gain more attention. Past studies have shown that most people visit TikTok not for information and learning experiences but because they find video sharing on TikTok interesting, fun, and novel ^[11]. Therefore, TikTok provides users with a sense of fun and social fulfilment. In addition, as a video-based social media platform, TikTok provides users with personalized recommendation algorithms. This feature not only allows users to become addicted quickly but also allows them to watch more video content under the limitations of time and space, which is an opportunity to satisfy users' needs ^[11]. Although the content of RedNote is related mainly to commodities, the excellent design of the video page with illustrations and text increases the convenience and pleasure of communication between users and features personalized recommendation algorithms. The cognitive and emotional dimensions (except informational), social demand dimensions, and satisfaction opportunities are superior to those of Weibo. Based on the above reasoning, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

2.1.2. Hypothesis H1b

In terms of the cognitive–emotional resource dimensions, social need dimensions, and fulfilment opportunities, TikTok will score higher than RedNote in terms of niche breadth and competitive superiority, which in turn will score higher than Weibo.

RedNote is a social media platform that focuses on graphics, and sharing graphics through its platform promotes products and shares many learning and life experiences. Past studies have shown that most people who visit TikTok do so more for information and learning experiences. Although this sharing is slower than microblogging, it is more in-depth and interesting than microblogging sharing ^[12]. Therefore, RedNote provides users with more exciting and richer content. In addition, the TikTok page design is streamlined, and it is easy to like, favorite, and retweet. Obtaining and sharing information is convenient and the highest level of satisfaction in the service resource dimension is provided. Although the content of TikTok Yin is mainly entertainment, the convenience of the page design and the vast amount of video sharing is superior to that of Weibo in terms of convenience, tool utility and richness. Based on the above reasoning, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

2.1.3. Hypothesis H1c

In the service resource dimension, RedNote has greater niche breadth and competitive superiority scores than TikTok, which in turn has greater niche breadth and competitive superiority than Weibo.

2.2. Niche overlap, competitive superiority, and replacement behaviours

Like organisms in the environment, the media industry relies on a limited number of resources to survive, and if multiple media outlets rely on the same resource, competition between media outlets increases ^[7]. To ensure competition for limited resources, niche theory can empirically and microscopically demonstrate how media use resources, how much they compete, and which media dominate when competing ^[13]. There are two forms of substitution between media: partial and complete. The type of substitution between media is determined by niche overlap and competitive advantage. Competitive substitution occurs between dominant media if there is a partial overlap of resources; however, if there is a total overlap of resources, dominant media will displace disadvantaged media. However, full substitution is uncommon and often leads to partial functional substitution ^[13]. The above information is based on the characteristics of Weibo, RedNote, and TikTok. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis.

2.2.1. Hypothesis H2a

With respect to information, Weibo and RedNote overlap more than TikTok, and TikTok and Weibo overlap more than RedNote.

2.2.2. Hypothesis H2b

With respect to the cognitive and emotional resource dimensions, social resource dimensions, and satisfaction

opportunities, the overlap between TikTok and Weibo was greater than that between RedNote and TikTok.

2.2.3. Hypothesis H2c

In the service resource dimension, the overlap between TikTok and RedNote is greater than between Weibo and RedNote, and the overlap between RedNote and Weibo is greater than between TikTok and Weibo.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Questionnaire design and distribution

This study draws on several studies on social media, including Li et al. (2017) ^[14], Fragou et al. (2020) ^[15], Yang et al. (2022) ^[16], Chen et al. (2021) ^[17], Kim et al. (2016) ^[18], Sebastian et al. (2021) ^[19], Jung et al. (2005) ^[20], Park et al. (2020) ^[21], Yanyan et al. (2022) ^[22], Dimmick et al. (1997) ^[23]. These studies were used to determine the items of satisfaction gained and opportunities for satisfaction. This study identified 36 items used in previous studies and classified them into four main categories: the information–emotional resource dimension, the social resource dimension, the service resource dimension, and fulfilment opportunities. A questionnaire was used for the survey in this study. All the interviewees were required to have experience using these three social media sites. Through this procedure, 31 items were developed in this study regarding the satisfaction and opportunities for satisfaction that people obtain from the three social media platforms.

The questionnaire that followed the identification of the items was based on four criteria, gender, education, age, and occupation, and purposively interviewed people with different backgrounds to diversify the responses. The educational level of the users ranged from high school to PhD, and their ages ranged from 20 to 70 years. The users' occupations included students, company employees, civil servants, freelancers, retirees, etc. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure these 31 items, which were subsequently used in the questionnaire. All the data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article [and its supplementary information files].

The recruitment period for this study begins on 20 May 2023 and ends on 20 June 2023. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Sichuan University of Media and Communication, and all the methods used in the study were conducted in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations of the College Ethics Committee. The questionnaire design and methodology of the study were scientifically sound, fair, and impartial, and posed no harm or risk to the participants. Participants were recruited on the basis of voluntary and informed consent, and their rights and privacy were protected. There are no conflicts of interest and no ethical or legal violations. A total of 896 questionnaires were collected and assigned unique numbers, and the data were entered through the questionnaire website. The number of questionnaires used for the final analyses was 565, excluding those that needed to be answered truthfully where problems arose during the data cleaning. Recording and compilation were performed via SPSS 26 and questionnaire output. Confirmatory factor analysis was then conducted via Amos.

3.2. Confirmatory factor analysis for gaining satisfaction and opportunities for satisfaction

In this study, it was necessary to obtain a unified set of factors for the three social media platforms in terms of obtaining satisfaction and opportunities for satisfaction. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were chosen to achieve this goal. The procedures for the specific analyses were as follows:

- (1) Three EFA were first conducted on the responses to the 36 items on users' satisfaction and opportunities for satisfaction from the three types of social media. The results of the EFA indicated that Weibo achieved the best results in terms of factor loadings and percentage of explanations; therefore, this study was based on Weibo data, and three CFAs were conducted via Amos software.
- (2) Several criteria proposed by statisticians were used. These criteria include CFI (> 0.90), NNFI (> 0.90), IFI (> 0.90), and RMSEA (< 0.10) ^[24].

Table 1 summarizes the results of the CFA, which shows that after deleting the five items, the values of CFI, NNFI, IFI, and RMA are all above 0.90, and those of NFI are above 0.80. The RMSEA values for the three types of social media are all less than 0.10, indicating that the overall fit is acceptable ^[24].

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis of the three social media networks

Gratifications and opportunities	Weibo	RedNote	TikTok
Factor 1:			
Factor 1.1	0.823	0.626	0.788
Factor 1.2	0.85	0.762	0.806
Factor 1.3	0.744	0.713	0.671
Cronbach α	0.87	0.931	0.924
Factor 2:			
Factor 2.1	0.774	0.611	0.562
Factor 2.2	0.812	0.593	0.759
Factor 2.3	0.796	0.706	0.583
Cronbach α	0.864	0.929	0.922
Factor 3:			
Factor 3.1	0.903	0.642	0.7
Factor 3.2	0.924	0.792	0.838
Cronbach α	0.875	0.931	0.924
Factor 4:			
Factor 4.1	0.74	0.642	0.74
Factor 4.2	0.775	0.732	0.773
Factor 4.3	0.802	0.738	0.758
Cronbach α	0.876	0.93	0.922
Factor 5:			
Factor 5.1	0.789	0.64	0.731
Factor 5.2	0.808	0.748	0.748
Factor 5.3	0.735	0.75	0.632
Cronbach α	0.866	0.93	0.922
Factor 6:			
Factor 6.1	0.798	0.818	0.759
Factor 6.2	0.868	0.861	0.832
Factor 6.3	0.744	0.678	0.768
Cronbach α	0.865	0.929	0.922
Factor 7:			
Factor 7.1	0.811	0.627	0.776
Factor 7.2	0.875	0.827	0.674

Table 1 (Continued)

Gratifications and opportunities	Weibo	RedNote	TikTok
Factor 7.3	0.795	0.671	0.608
Cronbach α	0.868	0.93	0.922
Factor 8:			
Factor 8.1	0.696	0.761	0.715
Factor 8.2	0.816	0.817	0.79
Factor 8.3	0.601	0.651	0.709
Cronbach α	0.861	0.93	0.923
Factor 9:			
Factor 9.1	0.783	0.528	0.744
Factor 9.2	0.814	0.699	0.757
Factor 9.3	0.591	0.787	0.718
Cronbach α	0.868	0.93	0.927
Factor 10:			
Factor 10.1	0.601	0.771	0.607
Factor 10.2	0.799	0.807	0.801
Cronbach α	0.865	0.931	0.922
Factor 11:			
Factor 11.1	0.719	0.749	0.723
Factor 11.2	0.782	0.66	0.818
Factor 11.3	0.75	0.692	0.721
Cronbach α	0.863	0.93	0.924
Goodness of fit			
χ^2	758.088	940.38	774.948
Df	379	379	379
RMSEA	0.056	0.059	0.047
NFI	0.838	0.855	0.892
IFI	0.912	0.908	0.942
CFI	0.91	0.906	0.941

4. Result

Using factor analysis, four niche dimensions were identified in this study. The first niche dimension was information, pleasure, trend, and addiction, with 11 items. This niche dimension comprises two subdimensions, cognitive and affective, with the cognitive dimension focusing on information satisfaction and the affective dimension focusing on pleasure, trend and addiction satisfaction. The second niche dimension consists of social interaction, social presence, and social relationships, with nine items, i.e., satisfaction from social relationships, which involves achieving social interaction functions, finding social presence, and establishing social relationships during social media use. The third niche dimension comprises convenience, tool

utility, and content diversity, with 8 items from services or facilities provided by social media. The last dimension comprises 3 items on the level of opportunity for satisfaction related to efficiency and freedom from time and space constraints.

Table 2. Results of the analysis of Niche breadth by Weibo, RedNote, and TikTok

Sortation		Weibo	RedNote	TikTok
Number		317	426	478
Cognitive & Emotional Dimensions (A)	Information (1)	0.889	0.752	0.806
	Pleasure (2)	0.762	0.774	0.841
	Trendiness (3)	0.532	0.772	0.862
	Addiction (4)	0.733	0.734	0.808
Social Dimension (B)	Social Interaction (5)	0.797	0.723	0.791
	Social Presence (6)	0.669	0.688	0.772
	Social Relation (7)	0.627	0.633	0.720
Service Dimensions (C)	Convenience (8)	0.782	0.825	0.804
	Tool Utility (8)	0.607	0.647	0.619
	Content diversity (9)	0.812	0.845	0.819
Satisfaction Opportunity (D)	High efficiency (10)	0.819	0.832	0.857

This study calculates the degree of ecotype overlap and competitive advantage in terms of satisfaction and opportunities obtained from the three social media using the Dimmick formula. **Table 1** summarizes the scores for ecotype breadth, ecotype overlap and degree of competitive advantage. The data in **Table 1** show that in the cognitive–emotional resource dimension, for all three factors except informativeness, the ecotype width of TikTok is the widest, that of RedNote is the second widest, and that of Weibo is the narrowest. For informativeness, the niche width of Weibo is the widest, that of TikTok is the second widest, and that of RedNote is the narrowest. In terms of service resources, the ecotype width of RedNote is the widest, the ecotype width of TikTok is the second widest, and the ecotype width of Weibo is the smallest. In the satisfaction opportunity dimension, the TikTok ecotype width is the largest, the RedNote ecotype width is the second largest, and the Weibo ecotype width is the narrowest. With respect to the social resources dimension, the three social media platforms perform differently in terms of the dimension width. In terms of social interaction, the ecotype widths of Weibo and TikTok are comparable, and the ecotype width of RedNote is the narrowest. In terms of social presence and social relationships, the TikTok ecotype width is the widest, and the Weibo and RedNote ecotype widths are comparable. However, the data from satisfaction opportunities show that no significant difference between the three social media platforms in terms of ecotype width. In terms of ecotype overlap, the data in **Table 2** show that among the three social media platforms, RedNote and TikTok have the highest ecotype overlap scores in the four dimensions.

The data in **Table 3** show that in the service resource dimension, RedNote has a greater competitive advantage than TikTok, which in turn is greater than that of Weibo in terms of convenience and tool utility. In terms of toxicity and social relationships, the competitive advantage of TikTok is greater than that of RedNote and TikTok, and the competitive advantages of RedNote and TikTok are comparable. In other aspects, TikTok has a competitive advantage over the Little Red Book, which in turn has a competitive advantage over Weibo.

Table 3. Results of the analysis of the Niche overlap by Weibo, RedNote, and TikTok

Sortation		Weibo vs. RedNote	RedNote vs. TikTok	Weibo vs. TikTok
Number		277	255	353
Cognitive & Emotional Dimensions	Information	0.516	0.225	0.318
	Pleasure	0.148	0.258	0.429
	Trendiness	1.009	0.374	1.353
	Addiction	0.083	0.333	0.325
Social Dimension	Social Interaction	0.240	0.273	0.014
	Social Presence	0.233	0.425	0.476
	Social Relation	0.087	0.378	0.480
Service Dimensions	Convenience	0.179	0.054	0.188
	Tool Utility	0.182	0.140	0.078
	Content diversity	0.097	0.110	0.031
Satisfaction Opportunity	High efficiency	0.067	0.118	0.161

Table 4. Results of the analysis of competitive superiority by Weibo, RedNote, and TikTok

Sortation			Weibo vs. RedNote		RedNote vs. TikTok		TikTok vs. Weibo	
			W > X	W < X	X > T	X < T	T > W	W < T
Number			277		353		255	
A	1	N	13.872	2.392	3.350	8.775	4.569	11.264
		t	11.959***	-6.562***	-5.812***			
	2	N	3.854	6.543	1.657	8.548	11.951	1.000
		t	-2.968**	-9.445***	13.021***			
	3	N	0.190	16.507	1.388	11.105	19.441	0.196
		t	-28.106***	-12.977***	33.250***			
	4	N	5.803	5.686	2.465	10.899	11.324	2.980
		t	0.123	-10.410***	8.310***			
B	5	N	8.610	2.753	3.378	9.412	5.245	5.245
		t	6.586***	-7.198***	0.000			
	6	N	2.329	5.975	0.914	10.007	10.902	0.931
		t	-4.676***	-13.534***	12.160***			
	7	N	4.034	4.459	1.020	9.122	10.304	1.275
		t	-.536	-12.474***	11.489***			
	8	N	2.094	6.029	4.958	2.805	5.392	1.628
		t	-5.021***	3.071**	5.083***			
C	9	N	3.141	6.282	6.218	3.407	4.853	3.559
		t	-3.971***	3.921***	1.623			
	10	N	4.043	7.428	6.650	3.371	4.284	5.010
		t	-3.521***	4.095***	-0.792			
	11	N	3.078	5.885	4.292	5.659	7.745	3.128
		t	-3.310**	-1.686	4.812***			

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

5. Conclusion

This study used niche theory to study the competitive relationships among three social media platforms of Weibo, RedNote and TikTok. The main conclusions drawn from the data analysis are as follows:

- (1) These three social media platforms have comparable influences in China and can coexist in the Chinese social media market because users perceive them to have different advantages.
- (2) In terms of ecotype width, ecotype overlap, and competitive advantages, RedNote and TikTok belong to the comprehensive type, whereas Weibo belongs to the professional type. Social media with weak competitive advantages, such as Weibo, must attract users interested in information and socializing to survive in the mainland Chinese market.
- (3) Niche theory is a reasonable theoretical approach for scholars to study the competitive relationships between different media. Using niche width, niche overlap, and competitive advantage, scholars can identify the disadvantages and advantages of different platforms, and the media can understand how to strengthen their competitive ability.

This study contributes to the literature on niche theory by addressing the lack of research on micro competition in Chinese social media. It calculates the ecotone width, ecotone overlap, and degree of competitive advantage scores of the representative Chinese social media sites Weibo, RedNote, and TikTok. The study identifies the substitution behaviors of the three social media platforms in four dimensions.

There are several limitations to this study. First, this study only measured the level of satisfaction that users gained from using Weibo, RedNote, and TikTok. In other words, only the satisfaction gained through the service was measured, not the satisfaction pursued by users through these three social media platforms. In addition, this study has limitations because the factors were set through existing studies. In this context, these limitations can be overcome if the factors are set through and based on interviews with users and experts of the three social media platforms. Given that the characteristics of SNS users are currently segmented and fragmented, user needs research should continue by collecting various types of data. For this purpose, it is necessary to collect data in conjunction with the use of social media, such as when and where users use social media, and information on content suitable for individual users. Therefore, it is hoped that future academic research on social media users will provide clues to social media development.

Appendix

- (1) Niche breadth

$$B = \frac{\sum_{n=1}^N \left[\frac{\sum_{k=1}^K GO_n - Kl}{K(u-1)} \right]}{N}$$

where (Dimmick, 2003)

u, l = the upper and lower bounds of a scale (e.g., 5 and 1)

GO = a gratification rating obtained on a scale

N = the number of respondents using a medium

n = the first respondent

K = the number of scales on a dimension, k = the first gratification scale

- (2) Niche overlap

$$O_{i,j} = \frac{\sum_{n=1}^N \left[\frac{\sum_{k=1}^K (GO_i - GO_j)^2}{K} \right]}{N}$$

where (Dimmick, 2003)

i, j = medium i and medium j

GO = a gratification obtained rating on a scale for i and j

N = the number of respondents who use both i and j

n = the first respondent

(3) Superiority

$$S_{i>j} = \frac{\sum_{n=1}^N \sum_{k=1}^K m_{i>j}}{N}$$

$$S_{j>i} = \frac{\sum_{n=1}^N \sum_{k=1}^K m_{j>i}}{N}$$

where (Dimmick, 2003)

i, j = medium i and j

$m_{i>j}$ = the value of a respondent rating for those scale items on which i is rated greater than j (the sum of the actual values)

$m_{j>i}$ = the value of a respondent rating for those scale items on which j is rated greater than i (the sum of the actual values)

K = the number of scales on a dimension, k = the first gratification scale

N = the number of respondents who use both i and j

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