

# *Research on the Development and Popularization Strategy of Internet Micro-Public Welfare*

**-Taking “Ant Forest” as an Example**

**Jiang Haiyue**

*Tiangong University, China*

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**Abstract:** With the continuous maturity and development of science and technology, the era of the Internet is stepping in a more digitized and informationalized phase. At the same time, new communication models are constantly developed in this era, and the public welfare industry is also affected. By changing its current status, a new form of public welfare products, namely micro public welfare, is emerging. The most representative one is “Ant Forest”. It takes the advantage of social interaction to enhance people's sense of participation, combines public welfare activities with games and connects online virtual scenes with offline real life through Internet technology which all contribute to a public welfare activity that caters to the needs of the time. This new form is not limited to promoting the concept of low-carbon life and innovations can be seen in the development of micro-philanthropy. Since then, various Internet micro-public welfare projects have begun to boom. This article starts with the micro-public welfare activities represented by “Ant Forest”, analyzes the status and characteristics of the popularization of public welfare and its trend of development so as to make contribution to the development of the current public welfare industry.

## **1. Introduction**

With the development of the Internet era, a new mode of public welfare communication quickly occupied the online market and became popular among netizens and young people. Under this mode, various creative activities were launched on major social platforms to lead the users' participation. This kind of mode is named micro public welfare. It is indubitable that the emergence and operation of micro public welfare involves commercial transactions. The platform can obtain quantity of flow profits and increase brand favorability through planning activities. The fact is that the mode is even more a product of the time and technology and also the main development direction and the largest market for future public welfare activities.

Under this development background, Alipay's “Ant Forest” launched by Alibaba Group is extremely study-worthy and enlightening which has made an important exploration for China's public welfare undertakings. Other activities that have been extended since then all have common characteristics

related to the first exploration. In the mean time, they also have their own forms of further innovation. Under today's background of diverse cultures, the transmission of information is fast and trivial. So the way to capture the attention in platform activities and adaptation to the needs of the users has become the main exploration issue for the development of micro-public welfare.

## **2. An Overview of the Current Status for the Popularization of “Ant Forest” Internet Micro-Public Welfare**

### **2.1 Concept Explanation for “Ant Forest”**

“Ant Forest” is a kind of public welfare project launched by Alipay in August 2016 to encourage people to participate in environmental protection activities and advocate low-carbon life. It is also a product designed for personal “carbon accounts”. The carbon emissions reduced when you walk, take public transportation, pay online or purchase online ticket, etc., are calculated as the virtual energy that speeds up the growth of virtual trees. After the virtual energy is collected and the trees redeemed, Alipay's cooperative public welfare company will plant a real new tree somewhere on the earth and provide the user with a unique “Certificate of due diligence for national voluntary tree planting”. The public institutions and regions responsible for planting real trees are registered on the certificate, and the user's name is marked. The marketing of this activity immediately triggered a wave of tree planting among Chinese people. While awakening the awareness of low-carbon life and environmental protection, “Ant Forest” also contributed to Alibaba's own brand phenomenon.

### **2.2 Concept Explanation for Internet Micro-Public Welfare**

In the current diversified public welfare activities, “micro-public welfare” has been integrated into the life of the public with its easy participation and extremely low threshold. It is accepted by people and has achieved remarkable results in the social welfare industry. According to Baidu Encyclopedia's definition of “micro-public welfare”: Micro-public welfare refers to the improvement of people's lives and the increase in public awareness of public welfare. In the mean time, more and more citizens gradually participate in public welfare undertakings. Bits of goodwill converge into a powerful social force. On the basis of the traditional public welfare, this new mode has crossed the barriers of space and time. It has characteristics of timeliness and popularity, at the same time, it has triggered a phenomenon of universal participation. It does not require high educational support or a large amount of wealth to donate. In the case of the circumstance, one only needs to contribute the strength close to life and within ability. Among those activities, the most obvious and widely involved is the “WeChat Steps” campaign launched by Tencent on WeChat which uses the form of rankings to record the walking status of friends. At the same time, people can contribute to public welfare activities by donating your steps. While advocating the life philosophy of the National Movement, it also embodies the core concept of “micro-public welfare” for everyone's public welfare.

In terms of content, the breadth and depth of micro-public welfare is far beyond people's imagination. Problems ranging from environmental pollution to personal family difficulties are being solved by seeking help from the society in various forms through micro-public welfare platforms and channels in virtue of showing daily lives to truly present the situation and the status of people who need help, triggering compassion to narrow the distance of the users to arouse the users' resonance and enhance the participation of citizens. For example, they launched public service activities such as love

support educational activities, juvenile autism care and “Children in poor mountain areas can speak English” and so on.

### **3. Analysis of the Characteristics in the Popularization of “Ant Forest” Micro-Public Welfare**

#### **3.1 Dual Marketing of Social + Interaction**

As a payment software, social performance has always been a shortcoming of Alipay. After the launch of “Ant Forest”, a breakthrough was made to this field. “Stealing energy” by adding Alipay friends to each other has undoubtedly become the most popular activity. Users can obtain energy from Alipay friends within a certain period of time, and can also obtain a “protective cover” to prevent friends from charging their own energy by completing tasks. What’s more, there is also a mutual assistance mode that provides energy to friends by watering friends’ trees. And through the energy ranking, people can also know the energy amount and status of trees of others accordingly. The design of “stealing energy” quickly created a large number of interactive activities, which greatly improved the user experience, caused heated discussions on low-carbon environment issues, and promoted interactive exchanges on environmental protection topics on the Internet. At the same time, after fully launched “Ant Forest”, relevant reports on major social platforms further expanded its social influence, and the low-carbon concept it conveyed was reprocessed and entered the public eye.

The users of “Ant Forest” play the dual role of spreaders and the target group in the process of participation. It uses social interaction to carry out precise secondary marketing of the event. The interactive mode also affects its inherent social circle thus becoming a small accumulation type of communication effect. Accompanied by the marketing activities of media communication, the depth and breadth of the communication effect is self-evident.

#### **3.2 Formal Innovation of “Game + Environmental Protection”**

Micro-Publicity is different from former traditional educational-style behaviors for environmental protection which conveys the concept of public welfare in the form of shouting slogans, it has made major reforms in its own style. The biggest feature of “Ant Forest” is the gamification which mobilizes people to participate in environmental protection and public welfare through entertaining and playing games so that people imperceptibly accept the concept of low-carbon life and apply it to their lives.

The public’s protection for the environment is stimulated through the entertainment and it attracts users with a contemporary network method of competition and “cultivation” which expands the efficiency and benefits of popularization. However, what is worth noting is that excessive addiction in the game will offset the original intention of low-carbon environmental protection. Most users “ant forest” users’ intention are not to protect the environment, but to gain the game experience of stealing energy and displaying rankings. In this way, it is inevitable that there will be an increase in obsessiveness and rivalry. So how to increase the intensity of the role of educating the audience in the game mode so that the low-carbon theme it promotes can be better presented is worth exploring and reflecting on.

#### **3.3 Boundary Breakage of “Reality + Virtual”**

In the new era of the Internet and with the support of powerful technology, people can simulate the

process of planting real trees in the “Ant Forest”. In real life, the energy for virtual trees can be obtained through sports, hiking, green consumption and other measures and users can also see real trees through the visible Alxa map. Internet technology has broken the boundary between reality and virtuality. The behavior of users in virtual communities has gained the actual value in real life which further realized the creation of a low-carbon environment online and offline.

The power of civilians and the corporate planting plan are combined through the “Ant Forest”. Micro-Publicity at present is more a medium, a publicizing platform which builds bridges for goodwill. At the same time, this data-based model has increased the loyalty of users and users have more sense of participation in the whole process of activities thus helps forming users’ self-identity. The construction of the linkage between reality and virtuality is a concrete manifestation of micro-public welfare activities, and it is also a presentation of the concept of equalization of public welfare.

#### **4. Research on the Improvement Strategy of “Ant Forest” in Communication**

##### **4.1 Increase Publicity and Attract Users to Participate**

The spread of “Ant Forest” mainly relies on the spontaneous activities of the users and it is far from enough. Alipay can promote marketing on major platforms, plan large-scale topic activities and establish its own unique product logo. It can also plan hot topics on Weibo to drive influence through celebrity promotion. At the same time, it can add personal understanding of low-carbon life in order to expand the popularization of low carbon ideas. In addition, video planning. By shooting short videos for the trees planted in Alxa, or making “ant” animated character stories, etc. and put them on major video platforms can expand the appeal of “Ant Forest”. What’s more, developing H5 mini programs which allows users who don't use Alipay get access to easy participation can thereby help in quickly occupying the market and attracting a larger number of users.

##### **4.2 Incorporate Environmental Protection Knowledge and Expand the Popularization Effect**

The core concept of “Ant Forest” conveys the idea of low-carbon life, but in the process of product design and communication the effect of entertainment is greater than popularization of science. Therefore, it is necessary to add a creative element to attract users to acquire environmental protection knowledge spontaneously from drop by drop of energy. “Ant Forest” can increase the question and answer session and grasp this element to enrich the product. It would be better to allow users collect mature energy to grow trees every day while answering questions simultaneously to win other additional rewards and adding new medals and logos to meet users' psychological needs. This method conveys the knowledge of environmental protection subtly, achieves the intention of education and further enhances the social value of the product.

##### **4.3 Provide Follow-Up Data to Enhance users’ Trust**

The emergence of various social events in the past has caused a crisis of trust in public welfare undertakings, and there are doubts still exists. Through accurate public welfare positioning and promotion of universal participation can promote communication and interaction between users and is more conducive to the transparency of the media. To implement it in “Ant Forest”, that is, using real-time data updates or shooting related video series so that users can understand and predict the

development of the industry, and see actual feedback on their own contributions which is also more conducive to the development of the activity. At the same time, the power of data feedback cannot be ignored. In most cases, people don't know how much they have done and what the meaning it is. However, these can be well reflected by big data. The appearance of the desert with green plants can be projected through the new technology VR effect so that users realize that their contributions have their own power. In this way, Alipay can establish a reward mechanism and increase users' initiative for participation.

## **5. The Development Trend of Internet Micro-Public Welfare Communication**

### **5.1 Two-Way Combination of Commonality and Individuality**

Alipay is one of the giants of mobile payment and its own “Ant Forest” public welfare activities also play a leading role among the platforms. The success of “Ant Forest” has promoted various major industries to carry out forms of micro-public welfare such as the “Clean +” action initiated by Tencent Mobile Manager and the popular WeChat step donation campaign. As far as Alibaba itself is concerned, while fulfilling the obligation of public welfare activities, it also increased its own social and economic benefits and various financial products and promotion activities followed. Alibaba launched the “Ant Manor” in August 2017. Users can donate by feeding chickens and obtaining eggs which make contributions to charity causes for “congenital heart disease”, “poor women” and “blind children”. It is not difficult to find that the current micro-welfare led by Alipay’s “Ant Forest” is becoming more comprehensive, mature and systematic. The individualized development of various activities undoubtedly meets the needs of various groups of people and their commonality, gamification, equality and popularization, is also reflected. This represents the continuous improvement of the quality of Chinese citizens and also promotes the development of public welfare.

### **5.2 Double-Sided Expansion of Scales and Fields**

With the continuous development of Internet micro-public welfare, the field and scale of its involvement are also expanding. The expansion of the scale is reflected in three major platforms, they are Sina Weibo, Tencent and Alipay. With help of their own social advantages, online payment, and the characteristics of being close to life, they planed one after another continuous and in-depth public welfare activities. Take “Ant Forest” as an example. Its essence is an environmental protection activity of Alipay. However, with its continuous development, Alibaba has also opened topical discussions on Weibo, and in the later stage, it has started with the creation of “Jifu activities”, “Collaboration trees” and “Ant Manor”, etc. The scale of the project has continued to expand.

From the perspective of the field, the “Ant Forest” seems to be limited to environmental protection, but in fact its extension is extremely broad. In the same way, Micro-Publicity has already involved medical and health care, brand donations, education support, child growth, animal protection, disaster relief and other aspects, bringing together the power of the masses in various forms. We sincerely hope more people are helped.

### **5.3 Triple-Win Model of Demand, Users and Platform**

The development of micro-public welfare is the result of netizens' enthusiasm for participation and

the platform's vigorous guidance. This is a win-win model. For the demand side, according to the channels provided by the platform, they can receive assistance from others to help complete the self-extrication; for users, they can also reap spiritual and material satisfaction; for the platform, it is even more a marketing method. The most typical one is Alibaba's "Public Welfare Goods" project launched on Taobao which refers to a user participates in the project by purchasing a specified product on the Taobao platform. After the transaction is successful, the merchant signs an agreement with the platform in the early stage donates the purchase price to a designated charity foundation in a certain proportion to promote the development of public welfare undertakings. For users, they tend to choose products that participate in the project. From their own point of view, they can get the products they need at the same price and give their love to others. For platforms, using this model to attract audiences to consume and expand platform profits is also a virtuous circle. The project, buy the red special edition of Apple 11 "PRODUCT" to help Africa fight AIDS, has the same intention with Taobao.

## 6. Conclusion

In this era under the coverage of comprehensive network, the power of micro public welfare is becoming more and stronger. These seemingly small micro-public welfare activities are in fact the transmission of human empathy and the inheritance of Chinese culture. With the rapid development of society, we need more comfort from strangers and a manifestation of self-existence. We believe that public welfare activities are everywhere and good deeds will never disappear. How to integrate public welfare activities into other social activities to obtain better economic and social benefits is a question worth considering for each of us.

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