

# **The Effect of WeChat Official Accounts on Chinese Consumers' Purchase Intentions**

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## A Table of Abbreviations

<b>Chapter (s)</b>	<b>Concept in Abbreviation</b>	<b>Concept in full</b>
Abstract, 1	WOAs	WeChat Official Accounts
Abstract, 1, 2	WOM	Word of Mouth
Abstract, 1,2	eWOM	Electronic Word of Mouth
1,5	RQs	Research Questions
2	CRM	Customer relationship management
2	APIs	Application Programming Interfaces
2	UGT	Uses and Gratifications Theory
4	TAM	Technology Acceptance Model
2,4	U&G	Uses and Gratifications
4	O2O	Online to Offline

## **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed by \_\_\_\_\_

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## Abstract

WeChat Official Account (WOA) is an innovative platform built upon WeChat, a mobile social networking tool designed primarily for online communication. WOAs offer a formal way for companies to interact with their customers through WeChat and have been leveraged as a marketing apparatus by multinational enterprises to communicate and interact with Chinese consumers by utilising the platform's multimodality. Multimodality on WeChat is manifested in the integration of texts, images and video clips – all of which shape WOA into a unique platform unlike any other. Scholarly studies on WeChat marketing have recently proliferated, yet research that specifically looks at WOA as a marketing communication platform is lacking. To fill this research gap, the objective of this study was to establish a conceptual framework that addresses electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and its influence on consumer purchase intentions and behaviours in the context of WOAs. Extrapolated from this conceptual framework, five propositions are proposed to demonstrate WOA consumer behaviour dynamics, especially with regard to consumers' purchase intentions.

**Keywords:** WeChat Official Account (WOA); electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM); social capital; consumer purchase intentions; consumer behaviours

# Chapter 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Research rationales and background

The *New York Times* recently called WeChat a ‘super app’ (Weber, 2016), for very good reason. Evolving from a messaging app to an open, diverse-function platform that can fulfil many basic needs of everyday life – such as taxi hailing, money transfer and paying utility bills, WeChat has nurtured the largest mobile media ecology system in China and created profound social, cultural and economic impacts. It is owned by Tencent Holdings Ltd, a social media platform leader in China for the past three decades (Pang, 2018). As early as 1999, Tencent launched the first PC instant messaging tool in China, known to many as QQ, and Tencent rapidly became one of the fastest-growing companies in China. Drawing on its rich experience and a huge existing user pool in the social networking site (SNS) market, Tencent began developing the WeChat app in late 2010. The initial idea was to build on the existing QQ features and add more functions that would attract mobile users, such as instant voice intercom, photo sharing, and audio/video chatting.

WeChat was officially introduced to the Chinese market in January, 2011. It only took 14 months for WeChat to achieve 100 million users (Pang, 2018). With almost weekly updates, WeChat introduced many trendy features such as ‘Shake’, which matches a pair of users who shake their phones at the same time (like a virtual handshake). It can also use a location-based service to connect recommended new friends by distance. One month after WeChat reached the 100-million-user milestone, Tencent initiated a global market penetration strategy, starting by supporting other languages such as Thai, Indonesian and Portuguese (Milward, 2018). Even though Facebook and Twitter are banned in China, overseas users can invite their Facebook and Twitter contacts to use

WeChat. As a result of this strategy, it only took another 6 months for WeChat to achieve 200 million users, and its user population has continued to grow exponentially. The latest available data show that WeChat has nearly 1 billion users, with Tencent's market value reaching 500 billion USD (Millward, 2018).

Some of WeChat's features are commonly seen in most mobile social media apps such as WhatsApp and LINE, and the 'Moments' feature is similar to the Facebook Timeline or Instagram. Posts can be text, pictures, video or forwarded webpages and friends seeing them can 'like', add comments, see mutual friends' comments and forward material on to their own 'Moments' spaces. Other innovative features have been embedded in the WeChat platform, including support for recreational activities, tracking, shopping, finance and transactions. Rapidly expanding from its basic SNS market, Tencent began collaborating and cooperating with other businesses to set up taxi services, facilities for scanning QR and barcodes, and payment functions including within-app funds transfer, cross-app funds transfer and payment features in general – all from within WeChat. All these practical functions, together with the large online population of China, make WeChat the most popular social media platform in the country, with the number of nearly one billion current users (Millward, 2018).

With the ubiquity of mobile devices and social media, shopping activities using mobile devices are also growing exponentially, as businesses have realised the gigantic opportunity offered by mobile devices and social media for marketing. Facebook's in-house consumer research department reported that in one 4-month period in 2015, one third of the transactions generated via Facebook ads were mobile purchases. They also found that the frequency of such purchases increased by 35% within the same period (Shields, 2015). And as expected, in the second quarter of that year, mobile purchases became the top source of revenue, with a 76% share (Husain, Ghufuran, &

Chaubey, 2016; Shields, 2015). The effect of mobile social media on marketing has become an important research topic.

## **1.2 Research objectives**

The popularity of mobile social media and mobile shopping has been a major driver of WeChat development, which is predominately used by Chinese users. As it is rooted in the largest population in the world, it is now ranked as one of the top three social media apps worldwide, together with Facebook and Twitter. By combining its state-of-the-art social, marketing and e-commerce features, WeChat soon became a very powerful tool that businesses can use to influence consumers' purchase intention, that is, what they plan to buy – a particular commodity or service – in the future (Liat & Wusan, 2014). The purpose of this study is to investigate how businesses use WeChat to influence user purchase intentions, especially with regard to WeChat Official Accounts (WOAs).

## **1.3 Research gaps and research contribution**

A wide range of studies has addressed issues associated with social media platforms and WeChat specifically, including consumer behaviour and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) activity engagement. Nevertheless, little research focuses on how WOAs can influence consumers' purchase intention. A literature review demonstrates a basic understanding of the nature of WOAs, which essentially function as an innovative platform for social media marketing, but a deeper understanding of consumer behaviours on this platform remains lacking. Prior research does offer an all-encompassing framework about businesses' motivation and intention to participate in the WOA community, but a conceptual framework available for business practitioners in various fields is underdeveloped. In this regard, a major contribution of this study is to develop a research model that goes beyond a specific industry and can be applied to different industries.

A second contribution made by this study relates to the differential impact of WOAs on user behaviour, in particular, eWOM. A strand of research addresses eWOM in the context of social media generally, however, eWOM in the context of WOAs is rarely discussed. Therefore, a major contribution of the proposed conceptual framework is the examination of user behaviour on a distinct networking platform with unique features.

Thirdly, this research also suggests future research investigate different age groups of consumers' purchase behaviors and purchase intentions in the context of social media marketing. Existing research shows that older people participate in online purchase as often as their younger counterparts, but with a relatively limited range of purchase types. With this understanding, it is worthwhile to examine how WOA content is shaped by businesses' targeting of different demographics.

#### **1.4 Research method and scope**

The research applies the methodology of a narrative literature review, which focuses on discussing the existing research and identifying gaps in knowledge (Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006, 2006; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The research focuses on how social media marketing impacts consumer behaviour in general; how WOAs are successful in influencing consumer behaviours in particular; and how eWOM impacts on customers' purchase intention. By solely applying the method of narrative literature review, no empirical data will be involved. Not only are the relevant peer-reviewed academic journal articles from a wide range of databases reviewed to ensure the reliability and authenticity of the research findings, but also resources and information from other reliable online sources, such as a variety of relevant statistics and figures published online.

## **1.5 Research questions**

Based upon the review of existing literature and identification of gaps in the research, the following four research questions were developed:

*RQ1: What are the key features of WeChat that make it different from other social media platforms in terms of mobile marketing?*

*RQ2: How does WeChat's in-app share and repost mechanism support electronic word-of-mouth among Chinese customers through WeChat Official Accounts?*

*RQ3: How do WeChat Official Accounts affect Chinese customers' perception and relationship with brands?*

*RQ4: How do WeChat Official Accounts influence Chinese customers' purchase intentions?*

## Chapter 2. Literature review

Purchase intention is a widely adopted concept used to evaluate the effectiveness of a marketing strategy and therefore helps to predict consumer buying behaviour (Gao, 2016; Laroche, Kim, & Zhou, 1996). Purchase intention can be influenced by a number of factors and concerns the subjective bias consumers have towards a certain product or certain brand. In this chapter, literature related to WOAs and consumer behaviour is reviewed. To understand the impact of WOAs on consumer purchase intention, the following streams of literature were reviewed:

1. literature on the broad area of research on WeChat and WOAs
2. studies on the success of social media, including WeChat, and the factors contributing to the success
3. research on eWOM as an effective way of impacting social media users, which is related to conceptions of trust, positive/negative eWOM, the generic link between online reviews and consumer behaviour, and the broad background of culture.

The chapter then combines the literature from these strands to explore their interconnections and provide a deeper understanding of consumer behaviour in the context of WOAs.

The literature review is structured as follows. Section 1 discusses literature related to broad research on WeChat, covering its main functions and the background the function of WOAs was created and disseminated. Section 2 discusses mobile social media, focusing on uses and gratifications theory (UGT). Section 3 deals with the factors contributing to the success of WeChat. Section 4 focuses on eWOM as a specific marketing strategy used in social media to explore its impact on consumer behaviour

and consumers' purchase intention in particular, which covers eWOM's impacts, determinants, and relationship with consumer behaviour, within a specific cultural background. As eWOM is a fundamental tool for branding and marketing via social media, this part of the literature review is discussed more fully than other parts. Lastly, section 5 summarises the relevant existing literature, based upon which a gap in the research is defined.

## **2.1 WeChat, WeChat Official Accounts and WeChat Moments**

The use of social media in China has grown faster than the rest of the world, and most Chinese consumers tend to consider purchasing the products or services mentioned on a social media platform (Magni & Atsmon, 2012). Because social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are not available in China, WeChat has become more and more integrated as a platform where multiple functions are built in. Developed and released by Tencent in 2011, WeChat initially emerged as a free messaging and calling phone application in China. Over time, it has quickly evolved as a comprehensive and integrated online platform that is useful in many aspects of users' daily life. WeChat is now one of the world's largest mobile apps, with 1 billion monthly active users (Millward, 2014). WeChat dominates the new online environment in China, which includes of a wide range of social networking sites (SNSs) and tools. The WeChat platform today offers many functions outside of conventional communication purposes such as advertising, mini blogging (in-app moments sharing), utility bill payments, P2P business, money transfer, tickets purchase, taxi booking, news updates, laundry pickup, real-time location sharing, donation, personal wealth management, and so on (Millward, 2018). In other words, WeChat features this set of diverse yet unique functions that are integral to the social networking platform, with WOAs being an important function mainly for the purpose of commercial use.

The WOA platform was launched by Tencent in 2012, and registration is free. It is designed as a promotion and cooperation service that can be used by individuals, businesses, government institutions and media to publish original information or disseminate content generated by others. Users are able to personalise their content after subscribing to a WOA.

There are three types of WOAs: subscription accounts, service accounts, and enterprise accounts. Subscription accounts support information propagation, like blogging or daily news platforms where multimedia content can be posted. These accounts are limited to only one message per day, and you can choose to specifically target a subgroup of your followers when sending an update. Targeted followers do not receive notifications when you send out a post, however. All subscription account WeChat users that one follows are nested under one dedicated folder headed 'Subscriptions', similar to an RSS feed. This is the only type of account registration open to individuals. A service account, whose name is self-explanatory, is designed to assist businesses to achieve better customer service and customer relationship management (CRM). This account has a number of additional business features that the subscription account does not support. Companies can have their service accounts integrated with WeChat's application programming interfaces (APIs) to build their own webpages, communication protocols and e-commerce and geo-localisation (GPS) apps. Service accounts can send up to four messages each month, and they are much more visible. Followers receive push notifications when a service account sends broadcast messages; each service account is presented individually in line with followers' chat threads with other friends. The third type of account – the enterprise account – is designed for organisations' internal communication and management; it is not relevant to our research topic and therefore will not be discussed in detail.

Table 1 below shows the differences between the first two types of WOAs. The general guideline is that if one’s WeChat strategy primarily involves daily information broadcast to users, the subscription account type is sufficient. If the goal is to have more advanced business functionalities – especially e-commerce activities – then the user should consider opening a service account. Many companies now use both types of WOAs.

*Table 1: WeChat Official Accounts: A comparison between the two major types*

<b>Features and functionalities</b>	<b>Subscription account</b>	<b>Service account</b>
Push frequency allowed	One per day	Four per month
Segment broadcasting: Target specific subgroups of followers	Yes	Yes
Auto-reply to followers: Content can be a URL, message, picture, sound, video; one can collect login credentials in openLD (Open Link Directory)	Yes	Yes
Customised interactive menus	Yes	Yes
WeChat Wi-Fi hotspot: Offer free Wi-Fi to followers, aiming at increasing exposure of the WOA to offline customers	Yes	Yes
Direct interaction with followers	Yes	Yes
WeChat Shake: Use iBeacon technology to enable proximity-based marketing activities and communications	No	Yes

*Table 1(continued): WeChat Official Accounts: A comparison between the two major types*

<b>Features and functionalities</b>	<b>Subscription account</b>	<b>Service account</b>
Payments API: WeChat payments and vouchers	Yes (only to government or media hosts)	Yes
Automatic voice to text transcription to trigger auto-replies	No	Yes
Geo-location: Automatically send GPS coordinates to users	No	Yes (user's permission required)
URL shortening API: Convert a long URL into a short one before generating a QR code for better code-scanning performance	No	Yes
Push notification	No	Yes
Visibility to users	Low	High
Multiple QR codes: Allow each account to have multiple QR codes to split traffic	No	Yes

*Source:* Compiled from Brennan (2015); Grata (2014); Graziani (2017).

Because of WeChat's enormous existing user-base and diverse functionality, the launch of WOA was a huge success . Research shows that by 2016 the number of WOAs opened on WeChat had reached 12 million and over 52% of the Chinese population with internet access were using updates sent from WeChat official accounts as an important way of keeping up with the latest news (White, 2016). Research on WOAs is

already substantial, as the application of WOAs has been explored in multiple areas including online marketing, provincial archives (Liu, 2018), television (Ou, 2013), tourism (Lou & Ming, 2017), libraries (Xu, Kang, Song, & Clarke, 2015; Zhou & Lu, 2017) and so on. This research displays a very detailed segmentation of different user groups including government accounts, business accounts, accounts for start-ups, and individual accounts.

In order to better understand how WOAs work effectively in promoting business, there is another important feature of WeChat we need to consider, 'Moments', which can be understood as a timeline with posts, similar to the Facebook Timeline or Instagram. This feature was added a few months after WeChat was introduced in 2012, and is essentially the core functionality that promotes social networking activities in WeChat. A literal translation of its Chinese name is 'Friends' Circles'. Tencent (n.d.) markets this feature using the slogan 'When you share your life with friends, every moment is a gift'. The interface of Moments is like that of the Facebook Timeline. Like most other social networking platforms, users can share texts, pictures, weblinks and/or videos. But what makes Moments special is that users only share to a semi-closed social network, only accessible to people in one's WeChat contact lists who are friends, family or acquaintances. Posts with user-generated content or shared from WOAs or other platforms like Weibo (microblogging site or Chinese Twitter) and Tencent QQ can be displayed in a timeline format in one's Moments for one's WeChat friends to view, 'like' or leave comments. With WeChat's dominant position as a networking tool among the Chinese population, Moments was quickly exploited by businesses as a powerful tool for virtual marketing. Moments creates a virtual social community, and what content users share and how they interact with others through liking and commenting reflects users' desire to express their identity (Taylor, Strutton, & Thompson, 2012).

In short, WOAs constitute an important form of mobile social media marketing, so exploring the factors contributing to the success of mobile social media marketing is of importance. According to Gan and Wang (2015), WeChat, just like microblogging, generates content gratification, social gratification and hedonic gratification. In the next section, therefore, the relationship between mobile social media and UGT will be discussed by referring to the relevant literature.

## **2.2 Mobile social media and uses and gratifications**

Many studies on social media in the information systems literature have employed the UGT (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Gratifications have important impacts on the sustained use of information users, and the roles of different types of gratifications in predicting the sustained use vary across different research settings (Gan & Li, 2018). In general, the UGT suggests that individuals actively choose media according to their requirements. H. Li, Liu, Xu, Heikkila, and van der Heijden (2015) argue that UGT offers a nomological research framework without any predefined constructs. In social media studies the UGT has been applied to a range of platforms including Facebook (Hsu, Tien, Lin, & Chang, 2015; Malik, Dhir, & Nieminen, 2016), Twitter (Coursaris, Jieun, Van, & Younghwa, 2013), SNSs (Chaouali, 2016; Ku, Chu, & Tseng, 2013), microblogging (Gan & Wang, 2015), and social network games (H. Li et al., 2015).

Prior literature shows that different media are associated with different types of gratifications. For instance, Venkatesh and Brown (2001) found that the adoption of personal computers at home is driven by hedonic gratification (i.e., fun), social gratification (i.e., status) and utilitarian gratification (i.e., utility). More recently, studies have documented a wide range of social media. Xu, Ryan, Prybutok, and Wen (2012) found that the use of SNSs leads to hedonic gratification (i.e., leisure and affection) and

utilitarian gratification (i.e., instant access and coordination). In turn, H. Li et al. (2015) suggest that hedonic gratification (i.e., fantasy, escapism and enjoyment), utilitarian gratification (i.e., achievement), and social gratification (i.e., social pressure and social interaction) are generated from participating in social network gaming. Liu et al. (2016), meanwhile, indicate that content gratification (i.e., information sharing, self-documentation and self-expression) and technology gratification (i.e., convenience, media appeal and social presence) are derived from using microblogging.

The UGT has been employed to understand individuals' using behaviour of media in different settings. Gan and Li (2018) discuss the suitability of the theory in understanding user behaviour on WeChat, and identified the following benefits in applying the UGT to the use of WeChat. First, it is suitable for investigating the use of media at the individual level. Second, the UGT is suitable for examining motives in the setting of information systems (H. Li et al., 2015). Individuals use WeChat to meet their needs in a voluntary manner. Therefore, the UGT is helpful in showing whether the gratifications generated from individuals' use of WeChat explain their continued use of the platform, and is also useful in showing the roles of different types of gratifications in predicting individuals' sustained use of WeChat. Similarly, Zhang, Li, Wu, and Li (2017) examined how WeChat achieves user retention by considering social interaction ties, network externalities, and perceived values. They found that WeChat achieves user retention through performing a mediating role in the relationship between network externalities and social value and hedonic value. Attracting new users and achieving user retention is undoubtedly an important contribution to the success of WeChat, which are discussed further below.

### **2.3 The success of WeChat**

Before directly addressing the success of WeChat and exploring the key contributing factors, it is important to first look at its competitors. In terms of social media platforms, its main rival in China is Weibo (a microblogging site like Twitter). Comparing the two platforms, Gan and Wang's (2015) study identifies the specific motivations that drive users to choose WeChat over microblogging: private social networking and convenient communication are the two dominant ones, selected by 90% and 80% of survey participants respectively. The findings point out the focus on the 'private networking' feature of WeChat that differentiates it from other common social networking tools and also leads to different users' motivations and behaviours.

In exploring the key factors contributing to the success of WeChat, Jiao, Chen, and Yuan (2018) develop the so-called SIMPLE (i.e., Socialisation, Integration, Mobilisation, Popularisation, Localisation and Ecologisation) model, with which they show how these conceptual building blocks contributed to the rapid and big success of WeChat. These are discussed individually below.

*1. Socialisation:* WeChat establishes a viable means to bridge geographic barriers and a novel way for users to communicate with each other. As the largest and most popular social networking platform in China, its user stickiness is mainly due to an all-in-one design that makes functions available to users both inside and outside social networking functions. A notable point related to this aspect is the flexible social connectivity strategy employed by WeChat. This strategy is implemented through the concept of acquaintances' social circles and the functions of 'people nearby' and 'drift a bottle', which make social connectivity less distant and more interesting.

*2. Integration:* WeChat is an integrated platform that enables users to do various things related to their day-to-day life in one single place. As outlined in the previous sections,

these functions are closely integrated, which allow users to use any of the functions within the same app. In addition, over 200,000 offline shops are integrated on the WeChat platform, which allows users to download vouchers, get updated with promotions, and enjoy the convenience of online shopping.

*3. Mobilisation:* WeChat was designed to be used on mobile phones, which allows users to use its functions wherever there is an internet connection. Furthermore, with the increasing availability of mobile devices, WeChat is now available on iPad as well as PC. WeChat makes full and thorough use of mobile technology from sensors to GPS location to camera to voice. Another important feature that enables such mobilisation is the e-commerce function built into WeChat. Users can employ the WeChat 'Mall' function to inquire, choose, order and pay for products and services online and offline. Consumer behaviour on WeChat can also be traced and used in big data analysis. Such a business model provides benefits to users and businesses, especially individual sellers.

*4. Popularisation:* The level of social media market penetration for WeChat is second to none in China. This is mainly because WeChat always focuses on meeting the basic demands of users, which enables massive adoption among the Chinese population. Such popularisation can be attributed to at least three factors, namely, placing users in the heart of the design, its being free of charge, and its being easy to use.

*5. Localisation:* WeChat implements its localisation strategy through matching local information with users' individual preferences and then generating customised push notifications to different user groups. When it comes to advertisements and promotions, businesses can attract nearby customers by using this feature in WeChat.

*6. Ecologisation:* Apart from being China's biggest social networking platform, WeChat has created an ecosystem that embodies business innovation, services for users'

daily life, finance and e-commerce, basic city services, payments, entertainment, and travel (Jiao et al., 2018).

All these factors are best reflected in the WeChat Pay function, which is a popular means of participating in many activities in WeChat. Wang and Gu (2017) examined the social factors that contribute to the popularity of WeChat Pay, and found that social influence and networking ability contributed to users' employment of the mobile wallet by providing them with a sense of support. The WeChat Pay function is rooted in the 'red envelope' tradition in China, which has significantly contributed to its popularity among Chinese users. Along with all these special functions of WeChat, WOAs are also gaining more and more popularity in the realm of commercial use, which is another testimony to WeChat's success, along with its impressive word-of-mouth (WOM) effect.

## **2.4 Word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth**

### **2.4.1 WOM vs eWOM**

WOM is an extensively-studied concept in marketing and advertising and is mostly represented as interpersonal communication regarding products and services among consumers. WOM is considered as one of the most influential sources of marketplace information for consumers (Alreck & Settle, 1995; Arndt, 1967). The concept is influential in this domain mostly because consumers trust peer consumers more than they do marketers or advertisers (Blackshaw, 2006; Sen & Lerman, 2007). Furthermore, WOM is seen to be more credible and trustworthy as it is independent of the selling intents of marketers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Bone, 1995; Lau & Ng, 2001). An extensive body of literature suggests that WOM affects consumers' judgement of products, in particular the decision-making process (Bone, 1995; Dellarocas, 2003;

Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991; Laczniaak, DeCarlo, & Ramaswami, 2001; Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006).

Bickart and Schindler (2001) outline a list of online WOM platforms, including product review websites, brands' websites, retailers' websites, blogs, message boards, and SNSs, to which they apply the concept of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Although eWOM is similar to conventional WOM, eWOM has some unique characteristics. eWOM often takes place among people who have little or no previous relationship with one another and can sometimes be anonymous (Dellarocas, 2003; Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Sen & Ierman, 2007). Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) assert that one advantage of the anonymity is that it allows consumers to express and share their opinions more comfortably without revealing their identities. This, in turn, boosts the volume of eWOM by encouraging consumers to share their opinions with others. Consequently, the chances of consumers finding other consumers with expertise in choosing products on eWOM platforms increases (Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox, & Harrell, 1997). However, this anonymity feature of eWOM could also increase the complexity for consumers in assessing the quality and credibility of the eWOM, and such complexity only increases when marketers try to influence eWOM by providing consumers with compensation for reviewing products (Chatterjee, 2001). Consumers are therefore led to seek diverse information sources when assessing the information quality on the eWOM platforms (Greer, 2003).

eWOM is often examined in conjunction with SNSs, as the latter represents an ideal tool for eWOM (Chu & Kim, 2011). eWOM in the context of SNSs can be viewed through three lenses, namely opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing (Chu & Kim, 2011). Earlier studies often view opinion seeking and opinion giving as two factors in conventional WOM. Consumers with a high propensity of opinion seeking are

prone to search for information from others when making a buying decision (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996). In turn, individuals with a high propensity of opinion giving are more likely to influence attitudes and behaviours of others (Feick & Price, 1987). On online platforms, interactivity generates interactive and dynamic eWOM, which allows an individual to play multiple roles of an opinion seeker, opinion provider, and opinion transmitter (Chu & Kim, 2011). When the boundary between these roles becomes blurred, online consumers' action in searching for branding information, generating content and sharing content with others is particularly useful in strengthening brand relevance and engagement. In SNSs, opinion seekers may consider recommendations by friends or people known to them as reliable and credible, and thus may rely on SNSs as a place to get information to support purchase decision-making. In this regard, a socially extensive environment would provide opinion leaders with more opportunities to share their opinions on products with other consumers (Chu & Kim, 2011). In addition, Sun et al. (2006) assert that online forwarding is one important behavioural consequence of eWOM, enabling the flow of information. Opinion passing is more likely to take place in an online social context due to the unique features of the internet in channelling multidirectional communication, which allows consumers to spread the word on even a global scale with a few clicks of the mouse (Dellarocas, 2003; Norman & Russell, 2006). This necessarily raises consumers' concerns about the reliability of the information accessed via eWOM, that is, whether and to what extent can eWOM be trusted, so that the ultimate goal of winning customer loyalty can be achieved by utilising eWOM.

#### **2.4.2 Social capital, trust and eWOM on social media**

To understand people's trust in relation to social media, the concept known as social capital is instructive. Social capital is broadly defined as assets that are accumulated

through regular social connections between individuals, both offline and virtual, relating to resources that involve trust, norms and social networks (Coleman, 1988; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Pang, 2018). Returns on those assets can be instrumental or expressive values (Portes, 1998; Williams, 2006). The literature often divides social capital into two types: bonding and bridging (Chen & Li, 2017; Pang, 2018). Categorisation into these two types is based on two factors: social tie strength and the relational resources that strength is built on (Putnam, 2000). To elaborate, bonding capital derives from strong social ties such as family members and close friends – these relationships most likely pre-exist in the offline environment and bring high levels of trust and intimacy (Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield, & Vitak, 2010). They are well-defined social groups with small-scale interactions and people turn to them for strong emotional support and spontaneous help. Bridging capital, on the other hand, refers to values generated from weak ties with less intimacy and closeness, such as acquaintances (Kramer, Rosner, Eimler, Winter, & Neubaum, 2014). Unlike bonding capitals, the purpose of forming weak ties is less about trust and strong support; rather they are to broaden social and information horizons. As its name suggests, bridging social capital joins values and resources embedded in heterogenous clusters, leading us to relevant information support or new perspectives (Williams, 2006).

A plethora of empirical studies has recognised the positive impact of computer-mediated communication on social capitals cultivation and reinforcement (Chen & Li, 2017; Pang, 2018; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Mobile social networking platforms where mobility and online socialisation are integrated provide channels for people, both geographically approximate and dispersed, to intensively interact with both strong and weak ties. SNSs are powerful tools for forming new social

ties and expanding bridging capitals. One of the important benefits social capital brings is mutual trust (Chen & Li, 2017; Pang, 2018), which is also a focus of this research.

Trust philosophically binds individuals together with an intoxicating energy (Lingis, 2004). Trust embodies both 'emotional and cognitive dimensions and cognitive dimensions and to function as a deep assumption underwriting social order' (Lewis & Weigert, 1985, p. 967). In the domain of social media, trust involves providing evidence regarding who can be trusted for the information shared by him/her and from whom one can accept information without the need to verify (Tang & Liu, 2015). In fact, an important issue related to the use of social media is trust, as it is virtually the foundation of all types of communication (Warner-Soderholm et al., 2018). Kim and Ahmad (2013, p. 439) assert that 'in online social media-sharing communities, the success of social interactions for content sharing and dissemination among completely unknown users depends on "trust"'. Social media allows users to generate and share information and content in real time.

Nevertheless, the propagation of user-generated content induces new challenges for online users to identify relevant information and exacerbates the overload of information. In addition, there is considerable variation in the quality of user-generated content that sometimes can be rather unreliable or even abusive. Trust may facilitate a mental shortcut to obtain information from trustees or trusted entities, with two primary purposes: mitigating information overload and increasing information credibility. Thus, trust is important in assisting social media users in gathering relevant and reliable information (Tang & Liu, 2015). Overall, the social media sharing community can be described as a construct of open and unregulated participation, dynamism and self-regulation. These key characteristics facilitate social interaction among loosely connected individuals, knowledge discovery, information sharing, as well as the growth

of communities by self-emerging and evolving (Caverlee, Liu, & Webb, 2010). On the other hand, these characteristics pose significant challenges, especially when information seekers need to validate the quality of social media content to understand the reliability of the content providers. This is related to the distinction between social media and traditional web-published content. Web users of traditional published content are consumers of content created by a smaller number of publishers, while user-generated content is produced by a much larger group of users, which introduces the quality control issue (Kim & Ahmad, 2013).

In a more specific context, namely online marketing, Habibi, Laroche, and Richard (2014) examined the roles of brand community and community engagement in building brand trust on social media. They argue that social media provides an ideal environment for establishing brand community and develop a model showing how consumers' relationship with the components of a brand community built on social media (i.e., brand, company, product, and other customers) affect brand trust. Brand, company and product relationships are found to be positively associated with brand trust, while customer-to-customer relationships negatively affect brand trust. In turn, Pentina, Zhang, and Basmanova (2013) extend brand relationship theory to the setting of Twitter, where the impact of 'Twitter trust' on users' intentions to continue using the platform and to 'follow' brands that are hosted on Twitter is investigated. They document the role of similarity of personality traits among Twitter users and the Twitter brand in generating trust in Twitter.

One form of trust, translated into the context of online marketing via social media, is brand trust or brand loyalty, and in the loyalty and trust literature trust is considered as a main antecedent of loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Chiu, Huang, & Yen, 2010; Harris & Goode, 2004; Z. Zhou, Zhang, Su, & Zhou, 2011a). Some scholars believe that

social media provides an excellent opportunity for brands to develop their relationships with customers (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), while others believe the contrary (e.g., Fournier & Avery, 2011). Laroche, Habibi, and Richard (2013) develop a model to demonstrate how social-media-based brand communities can bind relationships among customers, product, brand, marketers, and other customers, and how these relationships can strengthen brand trust and brand loyalty. A broad consensus has been reached that enhanced brand community and consumer experience generates brand loyalty (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009; Z. Zhou, Jin, Vogel, Fang, & Chen, 2011b). In particular, McAlexander et al. (2002) argue that the cumulative effects of strengthened relationships in the customer-centric model ultimately lead to customer loyalty.

### **2.4.3 Positive vs negative eWOM**

#### **2.4.3.1 Positive eWOM**

After discussing the concept of eWOM, as well as the relationship between trust and eWOM, the focus now shifts to the determinants of eWOM, from both the positive and the negative perspectives. For marketers, it is important to know how to both promote positive eWOM and avoid negative eWOM by being aware of the factors that contribute to both.

In relation to conventional marketing research, a number of factors such as quality of customer relationship, customer satisfaction, customer trust, and customer commitment are seen as potential determinants for positive eWOM (Tsao & Hsieh, 2012). In particular, Tsao and Hsieh (2012) investigate the relevance and relationships of these variables to varying levels. They find that customer satisfaction is positively associated

with customer trust and commitment while customer trust positively affects customer commitment. Further, customer trust plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer commitment. Interestingly, they show that customer trust and customer satisfaction regarding products do not necessarily promote their intention for positive eWOM behaviour, and customers only display their willingness to develop positive eWOM behaviour when their trust and/or satisfaction are converted into customer commitment.

Based on a sample in China, Lien and Cao (2014) explored WeChat users' motivation, trust, attitudes and positive eWOM, and found evidence that confirms the path effects of a positive influence of entertainment, information, sociality and trust on attitudes and trust of WeChat users. They further show that customer attitudes influence positive eWOM on WeChat. This finding, in general, is in line with the findings concerning the association between trust and conventional WOM, such that consumer trust has a positive effect on WOM activities (Matos & Rossi, 2008; Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003). Meanwhile, Gan (2017) examined WeChat users' 'liking' behaviour in China, and identifies the important roles of hedonic gratification (i.e., enjoyment), social support and information seeking in motivating the 'liking' behaviour. In particular, enjoyment is the most important factor that influences 'liking' behaviour, with gender being a moderator in the relationship between gratification and liking behaviour. Although this is not directly on the topic of positive eWOM, 'likes' can be viewed as an important input for positive eWOM. Overall, this finding can be useful for practitioners such as social media developers and managers in attracting users to their service.

Methodologically, Lien and Cao (2014) conducted a survey of WeChat 246 users and found that trust can significantly impact users' attitudes towards the platform. As WeChat focuses on expanding social networking based on family members and real-life

friends of users, users tend to have very high trust towards the comments of products or services that are shared with them via WeChat. Trust has the mediating effect that encourages users to share and also take in the positive reviews from others. One major limitation of Lien and Cao's (2014) research, however, is that its sample is restricted to young adults below the age of 30. Excluding users over 30-years-old omits a major subgroup of the Chinese population (United Nations, 2017). Statistics also show that over the past few years the share of middle-aged and senior WeChat users has been growing significantly (Brennan, 2017).

#### **2.4.3.2 Negative eWOM**

The majority of studies focusing on determinants of eWOM focus on factors leading to positive eWOM. Only a handful examine what contributes to negative eWOM. Studies on negative eWOM often employ a comparative approach (e.g., comparing negative and positive eWOM in various ways). For example, Boo and Kim (2013) compare negative and positive eWOM intention by conducting an exploratory study in a restaurant setting. They examined antecedents of negative eWOM intention from customers who visited a restaurant for varying primary reasons, and found that customers' prior eWOM experience and preference for email communication led to a direct impact on negative eWOM intention. Further, T. Zhang, Omran, and Cobanoglu (2017) compared Generation Y's positive and negative eWOM, and find that the use of social media and peer influence have a significant impact on Generation Y's intentions to participate in eWOM regarding their customer experience. In addition, technological advancement in mobile technology has enabled Generation Y to spread positive or negative customer experiences rather than satisfactory recovery experiences. Interestingly, family relationships also influenced Generation Y subgroups (age groups 21–24 vs 25–35) in their participation in eWOM concerning either satisfactory or poor customer

experiences, which was most evident in a satisfactory recovery experience setting. Bachleda and Berrada-Fathi (2016) explored the research question of whether negative eWOM is more influential than negative personal eWOM. Their findings suggest a positive answer to this question. They show that negative eWOM at the personal level, which they call pWOM, is more influential than negative eWOM in the form of writing testimonials. To this end, the format of negative eWOM (e.g., verbal vs written) also makes a difference when one tries to understand negative eWOM.

Considering there is both positive and negative eWOM related to social media, both of which have great impacts on consumers, especially in terms of customer behaviour and customer purchase intentions, marketers, when using social media like WOAs for advertising and branding, should pay close attention to creating a positive eWOM environment. Using online reviews is one of the effective ways to produce positive eWOM and influence consumer behaviours as to purchase intention and decisions.

#### **2.4.4 eWOM and consumer behaviour**

The relationship between eWOM and consumer behaviour in the existing literature is mainly explored through studying the impact of online reviews on consumers' purchase intention. The relationship between eWOM and consumer behaviour is an extensive research area with a wide range of topics examining many aspects of consumer behaviour in the context of online reviews. In addition, it is an interdisciplinary research area embracing marketing, communications, information systems, computer science and so on.

The main avenue for consumers to acquire information that may influence their purchasing decision is online reviews. In online marketplaces, consumer reviews may have an important impact on other consumers' purchase intention. However, many

studies have documented that this relationship is moderated by a number of factors. Taking an advertising perspective, Lee, Park, and Han (2011) studied different effects of online consumer reviews on consumers' purchase behaviour, and identified that online consumer reviews are more affected by trust in online marketplaces than in advertisements. On the other hand, consumers' purchase intention influenced by online consumer reviews is more favourable than those affected by advertisements. Similarly, D. Park, Lee, and Han (2014) examined the moderating role of involvement in the relationship between online consumer reviews and consumer purchasing behaviour. They found that the quality of online reviews has a positive impact on consumers' purchasing intention. Purchasing intention is positively associated with the number of reviews, and low-participative consumers are influenced more by the quantity rather than the quality of reviews, while high-participative consumers are influenced by the quantity of reviews primarily in the case where high-quality reviews are presented. Zhu and Zhang (2010) focused on another moderator, product and consumer characteristics, in the relation between consumer reviews and sales. They found that online reviews are more influential for less popular products and for products whose consumers have more internet experience. In addition, they showed the different impacts of consumer reviews across products within the same product category, and suggest that firms' marketing strategies should be developed taking into account consumer and product characteristics. Key consumer and product attributes, in turn, have very important implications for the development of niche products.

Other studies focus on the usefulness of online reviews, and suggest this is an important factor that contributes to consumer purchase intention. For example, Filieri (2015) explored what makes online reviews useful by examining informational and normative predictors of information, and found that consumers are mainly influenced by the

quality of information as well as by consumer ratings and overall rankings. The study highlights that both informational and normative cues are important for consumers in assessing product quality and product performance through online consumer reviews. This finding further implies that information quantity and credibility have a limited impact on information diagnosticity, which Jiang and Benbasat (2004) define as consumers' perceptions of the ability of a website to convey relevant product information that can assist them in understanding and evaluating the quality and performance of products sold online, and in turn affects information adoption of consumers. Felbermayr and Nanopoulos (2016) assessed the role of emotions play in the perceived usefulness of online reviews by developing an approach to extract emotional content to measure different emotional dimensions of online reviews from different product categories. Findings from this study suggest that trust, joy and anticipation are the three most decisive emotional dimensions, while noting significant variation exists across product categories.

Purnawirawan, Pelsmacker, and Dens (2012) investigated the impact of perceived usefulness of online reviews on consumers' attitudes and intentions. In doing so, they examined the impact of balance (i.e., the ratio of positive and negative online reviews) and sequence (i.e., the order in which the reviews are displayed) of online reviews on the perceived usefulness of the reviews. In other words, they examined how these two characteristics of a set of reviews interact to determine the perceived usefulness. Further, they provide a more in-depth explanation about the gatekeeping role of perceived usefulness by investigating how perceived usefulness moderates the association between readers' recall of review content, their impression of the reviews, and their attitude and intention about the reviewed item. Overall, they argue that not only is review content important, but also that review sequence influences the perceived

usefulness of reviews. The important role of perceived usefulness is thus manifested in the case where reviews are seen as relatively useful, and recall of positive and negative review information influences attention and intention generation through the impression derived from the item being reviewed.

#### **2.4.5. Cultural impact on eWOM**

After surveying the forms, determinants, and impacts of eWOM, it is also important to study the broad context of social media use in relation to marketing. This research explores the effect of WOA's on Chinese consumers' purchase intention. Therefore, the literature regarding the impact of culture at varying levels on the adoption and use of eWOM should also be reviewed.

The effect of national culture has long been a key issue in international marketing research, including new product rollout decisions, global branding, and customer relationship management. Dobele, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, and van Wijk (2007) argue that culture is a determining factor in shaping recipients' emotional responses to online marketing and subsequent purchasing behaviour, and cultural values should be accounted for in the context of eWOM. An extensive amount of literature on this topic utilises a cross-country setting to compare impacts of different cultures on eWOM. For example, Park and Jun (2003) documented differences in internet usage and perceived risks of online shopping between American and Korean consumers. Similarly, Shen, Maceli, Zhao, Baack, and Bacon (2014) studied the impact of cultural and gender differences in China and United States on the adoption and use of eWOM. Fong and Burton (2008) also conducted a cross-cultural comparison between China and United States and found significant difference in participants' behaviour across discussion boards such that those in China were engaged in higher levels of information seeking and lower levels of information giving compared to US users. In addition,

consumers in China display a higher-level of engagement in discussions concerning the country-of-origin of products. Together these findings provide detailed evidence regarding cross-cultural eWOM behaviour.

Luo, Wu, Shi, and Xu (2014) studied the effects of individualist-collectivist cultural orientation on eWOM information, specifically on how individualistic culture influences readers' information credibility. They found that individualistic culture has a positive moderate association with information sidedness and negative moderate associations with information consistency and information rating. A key implication from these findings is that eWOM readers' espoused culture should be accounted for when analysing their cognitions as they process information. More recently, Tang (2017) examined the moderating role of culture in the relation between eWOM and product-market performance. The findings in Tang's study indicate that individualism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance weaken the impact of eWOM on market share, and that the effect of negative reviews and press releases has been overrated. Overall, the main implication of these studies is that international marketing strategies should account for local market cultural values, country-of-origin effects, and product competition.

## **2.5 Summary**

This chapter has reviewed a wide range of studies from different literature streams. As is evident from the above discussion, the body of relevant literature is extensive, with very detailed enquiries into various aspects of SNSs in general and WeChat in particular, as well as consumer behaviour in using social media and, most importantly, engaging in eWOM activities. The above comprehensive review of relevant literature led to the following research gaps being identified.

The first gap relates to eWOM in the context of WOAs. As discussed above, the creation of WOAs has its roots in the fast-paced development of social media network sites in China. However, specific consumer behaviours on this platform are relatively less well understood, and this is significant given this unique social, cultural and political background against which WOAs were created. Searching academic databases using ‘WeChat Official Account’ as keywords mostly returned studies on the WOA applications of certain industries or companies. Liang and Yang (2018), for example, examined how tourists interact with firms using the WOAs of those firms. They found that utilitarian motivation leads to more consumer interaction through WOAs, such as searching for travel information, which further stimulates WOM intentions. Gan (2016) and Xu et al. (2015) described Chinese public libraries and university libraries’ rationales, practices and the benefits gained by adopting WOAs. W. Li, Han, Guo, and Sun (2016) explored how WOAs were implemented as an effective communication and health education tool that prevented malaria spreading among Chinese travellers and workers in Niger. All these studies have enriched our understanding of users’ motivations, behaviours, and intentions in relation to WOAs, but it is hard to establish benefits for practitioners in other business fields as they focus on very specific cases.

A second research gap relates to a conspicuous lack of studies on WOAs and their differential impact (the impact of WOAs that can be differentiated from those of other social media) on user behaviour, and more specifically their relationship with eWOM. Using ‘eWOM’ and ‘WeChat’ as keywords in Google Scholar reveals that Gan and Wang’s (2015) research is the top-cited study, which compares gratifications gained from using Weibo and WeChat. In fact, most existing studies primarily focus on the special and unique features of WeChat as well as factors contributing to its huge success on a global scale. There is an extensive body of literature on online reviews and eWOM

in particular; however, there are few studies linking eWOM and WOAs. Conducting a study that links these two areas could generate new findings and knowledge. Therefore, future research should specifically aim at examining the role of eWOM in the context of WOAs and its impact on consumer purchasing behaviour.

Another aspect of future research to focus on is the demographic groups of WeChat users and consumers. Pfeil, Arjan, and Zaphiris (2009) found that people from different age groups behave differently on social networking platforms. Specifically, users from different age groups show distinctive profiling types and different levels of diversity in using social networking features. Other studies, like Sorce, Perotti, and Widrick (2005), focus on buying behaviour online. They found that older people purchased as much online as younger age groups, but their purchasing variety level was lower; in other words, the older generation tends to buy the same products repetitively or from the same vendor. Such a behavioural pattern of older age group indicates the importance of researching older age groups to gain a comprehensive insight into online purchasing behaviours. The findings also imply the need to differentiate marketing strategies to target specific demographic groups, including users from different age groups.

## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

As is mentioned in Introduction, this research applies the methodology of a narrative literature review, which focuses on discussing the existing research and identifying gaps in knowledge (Green et al., 2006; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). A literature review is a process of examining previously published research that relates to a topic (Cooper, Hedges, & Valentine, 2009), and it is an essential step prior to initiating any empirical research. According to the Educational Resources Information Centre's *Processing Manual*, a literature review is not simply gathering an annotated bibliography and briefly summarising every publication being reviewed; writing a literature review is treating ideas from primary research as data, and organising, classifying, describing, analysing, evaluating, and integrating that data leads to the answers to the research questions (Cooper, 1985; Levy & Ellis, 2006). An effective literature review always has a purpose, and an inductive nature; it provides an objective and comprehensive report of the existing knowledge on a field and helps the audience to place information derived from published research into perspective (Green et al., 2006).

### **3.1 Approaches of literature review**

There are generally two types of literature reviews: narrative literature reviews and systematic literature reviews. The latter type has emerged more recently; it has evolved in the field of health studies aiming to improve the rigorousness of literature reviewing processes (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). A systematic literature review is considered as a scientific tool which emphasises adhering closely to a set of methodological procedures of selecting, appraising and integrating all relevant publications (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). It mostly involves using meta-analysis, that is, statistical summary of the data, to draw conclusions (Lau, Ioannidis, & Schmid, 1997; Thomson et al., 2018).

The current research, however, adopted the more traditional approach, that is, the narrative literature review. In contrast to the systematic literature review, this type of review can cover a broader scope of literature on a range of issues that are relevant to a given topic (Cronin, Ryan, & Coughlan, 2008). Rather than listing the methodological procedures used to conduct the review, narrative literature reviews focus on *discussing* the literature (Green et al., 2006; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The key reasons why researchers choose the narrative literature review approach to review literature are well aligned with the objectives of the current research: it allows researchers to address research questions beyond the scope of one empirical study as it is not limited to one data set (Baumeister & Leary, 1997); a narrative overview of literature aids in understanding the state of the science of the topic being studied from a theoretical and contextual point of view; it is an excellent tool for elaborating the history or development of a problem or its management; and it is also a very helpful means to both summarise and criticise, in a way that many pieces of information and perspectives can be integrated in a well-balanced manner (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). The goal of this research is to thoroughly survey publications in various subtopics that are relevant to the research topic and provide a comprehensive, in-depth and objective analysis of the state-of-art knowledge on the social media platform WeChat, and specifically WOAs and their impact on consumer purchase intention.

### **3.2 The procedure for selecting relevant literature**

The specific methods taken to conduct this literature review were adopted from the narrative literature review guidelines established by Cronin et al. (2008) and Green et al. (2006). After selecting the research topic, a preliminary search of the literature was performed to check if the research questions had already been answered. Using keywords to search online databases is claimed by the most popular method of

identifying literature (Cronin et al., 2008). Google Scholar was used initially and the results were ranked from the most cited to the least. As discussed in Chapter 2, the keywords 'WeChat' and 'purchase intention' were used at this stage and it was found that the research topic represented a gap in the body of knowledge. Then 'WeChat' and 'purchase intention' were replaced with generic terms like 'social network' 'consumer behaviour' to broaden the scope of the literature searches. To ensure the searches were more comprehensive, synonyms and derivatives, such as using 'WeiXin', the Chinese name of WeChat, 'consumer behaviour', 'buyer's intention' and 'online network' were also considered. The inclusion criteria involved evaluation of publications' relevance to the theme of this research, how recent they were, and the quality of the journals that the research articles were published in. Relevance was determined by going through the associated abstracts of the articles. Using biased selection criteria that only include the publications supporting the same arguments is a common pitfall of narrative literature reviews (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Cronin et al., 2008; Green et al., 2006; Winchester & Salji, 2016). Therefore, publications that support different arguments were also selected, so as for the research to be as unbiased and comprehensive as possible. Also, although there was no specific timeframe impose, a study's publication date was an important factor because the research topic is a newly emerged phenomenon (WeChat was launched in 2011).

The quality of journals was mainly determined by the Scientific Journal Rankings, which reflect the credibility and quality of the peer-reviewed process (Cronin et al., 2008). In this regard, what makes Google Scholar the most effective literature-searching engine is that it provides the number of times a publication has been cited by others. Top-cited articles in the fields this research targeted are significant because they help to

identify the most influential and important publications in the various fields (Martínez & Anderson, 2015).

### **3.3 Synthesising the findings**

After the literature selection stage came the most challenging step of conducting a literature review: synthesising the findings (Green et al., 2006). First, each selected publication was read and information that is helpful to the intended research was highlighted or taken note of. The digital note-taking app *OneNote* was used to record and arrange the findings from each reading. Second, findings were categorised into different subthemes, which ultimately were used to construct the literature review chapter. Third, the findings were synthesised within this structure to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Fourth, the gaps in the research were identified based on the literature review findings, and a conceptual framework was developed illustrating the relations between the key concepts.

## Chapter 4. Conceptual framework

In this chapter, the conceptual framework derived from this research is presented, both graphically (see Figure 1) and in a narrative form. Based on the development of the research questions and the preceding discussion of literature findings, this integrative framework conceptualises a number of factors directly or indirectly resulting from users interacting with WOAs, which influence consumer purchase intentions and buying behaviours, as well as the relationships between those factors.

The framework depicted in Figure 1 has three main components: the top and bottom ones are the two subjects this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of eWOM is a key concept that explains how SNSs like WeChat impact purchase intentions and customer behaviour. The literature has also established the moderating roles that social capital, trust and culture play in the use of eWOM. The arrows in Figure 1 symbolise the relationships. The theoretical lenses of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Uses and Gratification (U&G) model (referred to the UGT mentioned in the previous literature review) can be utilised to show how WeChat, through WOAs, directly influences consumer purchase intentions and behaviours.

Introduced by Davis, Bagozzi, and Warshaw (1989), TAM is an influential model that examines users' acceptance and usage of computer technology. It has been widely applied in many information systems-related studies and found to be very useful in explaining adoption intentions and use of social media platforms (King & He, 2006; Legris, Ingham, & Collette, 2003; Rauniar, Rawski, Johnson, & Yang, 2014). TAM claims *perceived usefulness* and *perceived ease of use* are the two variables that jointly affect the acceptance and use of technology (Davis et al., 1989). They are defined as the degree to which users consider a technology system to improve their performance and

how easy it is to operate (Davis et al., 1989). The merits of the U&G model have already been covered in the literature review section, and therefore will not be repeated here. The two models were chosen to be integrated into the conceptual framework not only because they are both fundamental theories in explaining user attitudes and motivations towards a SNS, but also because they complement each other. TAM places the emphasis on system features and attributes and why users choose one system over another; the U&G model focuses on users and investigating what motivates them to use social networking tools. Together they enable a comprehensive analysis of why businesses and individuals choose to use the WeChat platform.

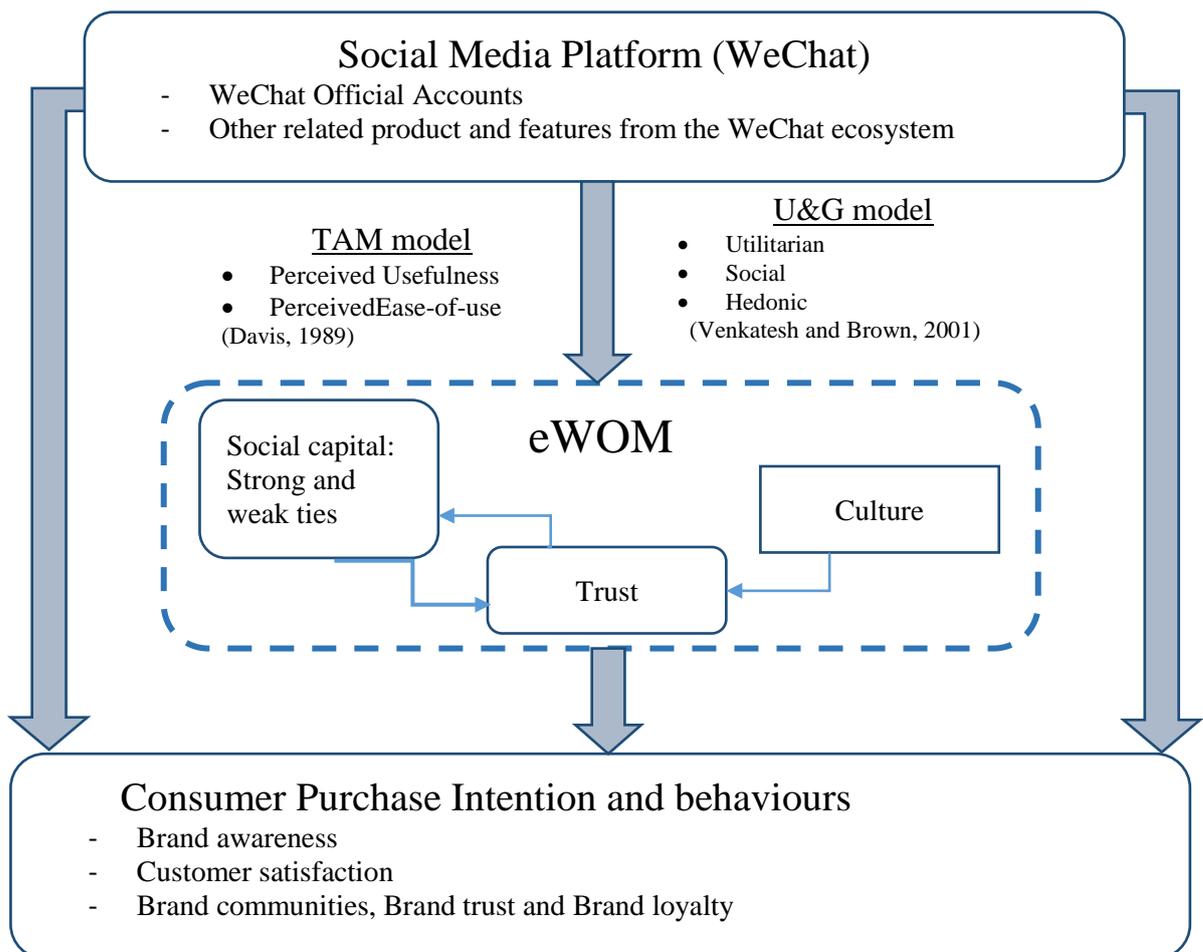


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

As previously discussed, WeChat is built to be an all-in-one application that can help with almost every task in a user's daily life. The rationale behind this is to improve its *perceived usefulness* among users. The fact that WeChat places an emphasis on helping users maintain their pre-existing offline networks is also perceived as 'useful', even to demographic subgroups that are not prone to engaging in online social networking. The SIMPLE model of Jiao et al. (2018) demonstrates that WeChat is a system that is perceived as both useful and easy-to-use. For example, WeChat is perceived as highly mobile, allowing real-time, easy and ubiquitous access; this has a positive impact on perceived usefulness. Information overload and security risks are two concerns generally shared by social media users and WeChat has addressed both by expanding its search functions. WeChat appears to reconcile the trade-off between privacy protection and information diffusion in social media (Li, Chen, Bai, Bian, & Zhou, 2016). WeChat allows users to impose many different restrictions and controls on what they receive and share, in an attempt to encourage perceived security, an aspect of social media that users value more nowadays than ever. This perceived security plays a major role in determining the usability of a system. Users can easily search and access brands' WOAs and their online stores (on WeChat or other leading e-commerce platforms). The search function has become a significant source of recruitment of new WOA followers; according to the WeChat index, nearly one-third of new followers track brands' WOAs using keyword searches (Pang, 2018). The WeChat index is another in-house product that provides insights into users' browsing behaviours and trends to help brand owners improve their WeChat marketing strategies. For both individual users and businesses who operate via WeChat, WeChat has won its dominant market position by scoring high on usefulness and being regarded as easy-to-use by its users. Therefore, in addition to the above conceptual framework, the following five research propositions are proposed.

*Proposition 1: The perceived usefulness and perceived ease-of-use have significant positive impacts on users' acceptance of WeChat products.*

As WeChat improves information propagation and business services, the posts and business functionalities enabled on users' WOAs should also be created and designed in ways that continue to encourage customers to interact with the brand via WeChat. When publishing posts on WOAs, the content should be interesting and useful, as well as relevant. It is worth keeping in mind the effects that visual cues have on customer satisfaction and purchase intentions in the context of online shopping. The attractiveness of the visual impression that targeted viewers receive from posts or by interacting with WOAs has a strong impact on their browsing and/or consuming experiences. Good visual presentation can evoke positive emotional behaviours such as pleasure and arousal, which in turn encourage purchasing or positive eWOM (Dieudonne, Yao, & Liu, 2016; Ha & Lennon, 2010), and therefore can be applied in e-marketing.

*Proposition 2: Positive experiences arising from reading, purchasing and interaction on WeChat increase the likelihood of purchasing decisions or/and positive eWOM.*

Based on the literature review, *utilitarian*, *social* and *hedonic* gratifications are three major areas relating to the sharing and receiving of eWOM in WeChat, which will be used in explaining other aspects of the conceptual model. *Utilitarian* gratification can be further broken down to the following constructs: fulfilling the desire for self-expression; information seeking; and information sharing. WeChat Moments allows the creation of private virtual communities that foster socialisation and information diffusion between users, established through both strong ties (family, colleagues and friends) and weak

ties (acquaintances). This notion ‘no WeChat contacts are complete strangers’ means that trust shared between users is generally higher compared to open social media, making eWOM more credible and influential in shaping WeChat users’ trust of the brands (Dieudonne et al., 2016). And within the social circles of WeChat, the levels of relationship connections between viewers and authors positively impact viewers’ purchase intentions. Sharing information about products or services consumed is part of the psychological motivation of self-disclosure overall (utilitarian), and/or can be purely perceived as being enjoyable (hedonic). This is commonly seen in the sharing of consumption experiences relating to luxury brands and leisure products via WeChat Moments (Pang, 2018). However, this sharing can also include spreading negative eWOM, creating and circulating negative experiences, or criticising the properties of a brand, which could be motivated by creating empathy among WeChat friends (hedonic) or providing information to help friends avoid unpleasant experiences (utilitarian). Either way, it may negatively impact on customer perceptions of the brands involved in the reviews.

*Proposition 3: Utilitarian, social and hedonic gratifications motivate users to share eWOM on WeChat and increase brand awareness.*

The benefits gained from eWOM behaviours on WeChat are presented to both users and businesses. To users, benefits arising from utilitarian, social and hedonic gratifications, as stated, go beyond the price discounts of e-coupons to interaction between users and friends in the contact list. To businesses, users function as a social agency that helps to spread the word via eWOM behaviours that cater towards brand awareness. Posting and reposting constitute a virtuous cycle. Viewers who see the gains are, in turn, encouraged to repost, which unlocks their eligibility to access benefits and their engagement in this

eWOM effect. Put another way, gratifications contribute to a win-win scenario for both users and vendors.

*Proposition 4: A collectivistic national culture is conducive to the establishment of a strong tie with a WeChat user's life associates. These life associates exhibit a high degree of respect and trust towards users' posts. Willingness to repost functions as a social support that aids the effect of eWOM on purchase intentions.*

Many businesses use WeChat to encourage online to offline (O2O) opportunities and increase brand exposure. e-coupons and special offers are offered to WOA followers to encourage them to continue interacting with the firm, and rewards are also promised if followers repost ads in their WeChat Moments and are able to collect a certain number of 'likes' for the repost. Viewers often are inclined to hit the 'like' button, not because they like the ads, but as a supporting gesture to help their friends to gain benefits. Leveraging national culture for product promotion is a very smart way to neutralise the negative emotions associated with receiving disruptive ads and turn the experience into a way to stimulate utilitarian and social gratification. As updates cascading through reposting and 'liking', WeChat users, not limited to those who followed the WOA, become brand ambassadors and help brands to increase brand awareness.

*Proposition 5: Positive user experience, gratifications arising from economic benefits and social interaction altogether cater towards positive eWOM that in turn evokes the intention to engage with and/or to purchase products/services.*

In order to positively influence purchase intentions, businesses on WeChat should not only try to increase eWOM, but also focus on the quality of eWOM. High-quality positive eWOM should be specifically designed to fit product types and targeted

viewers. Contrastingly, negative low-quality eWOM would lead to unfavourable consumer behaviours and discourage people from engaging with particular brands. Although eWOM on social media is often user-generated, in which case the business has low control over the content, many brands now sign up famous bloggers or other social media influencers and pay them to endorse the brand and post reviews from their WOA. As many of them became famous initially as bloggers, they are selected as effective eWOM sources not only because they are considered attractive and credible among users who are fans (Lim, Rozaini, Radzol, Cheah, & Wong, 2017), but also because they are also good at writing review articles that are interesting, trendy and useful.

## **Chapter 5. Conclusion, contribution, limitations, and future research directions**

This narrative literature review study set out to investigate the linkage between businesses' adoption of WeChat—specifically the WOA feature—and consumer purchase intentions and engagement behaviours. A full review was conducted based on existing academic literature on both WeChat and purchase intentions. Based on the findings of the review, a conceptual framework was developed with five research propositions proposed, centred on the concept of eWOM. Rather than WeChat's perceived usefulness and perceived ease-of-use, eWOM was identified as the most important factor in purchase intentions in relation to WOAs. In specific, the conceptual framework developed adequately addresses the key issues associated with the Research Questions (RQs) listed in the Introduction part of this dissertation:

*RQ1: What are the key features of WeChat that make it different from other social media platforms in terms of mobile marketing?*

*RQ2: How does WeChat's in-app share and repost mechanism support electronic word-of-mouth among Chinese customers through WeChat Official Accounts?*

*RQ3: How do WeChat Official Accounts affect Chinese customers' perception and relationship with brands?*

*RQ4: How do WeChat Official Accounts influence Chinese customers' purchase intentions?*

RQ1 is related to the key features of WeChat that make it different from other social media platforms in terms of mobile marketing. In the realm of mobile marketing, what distinguishes WeChat from other mobile media platforms is the unique user-brand

interaction enabled by WOAs. For instance, reposting a commercial article/tweet allows users to access discounts – a feature that has not been observed on other mobile media platforms. Given the moderating effect of a collectivistic national culture that compels an individual's life associates to hit "Like" in support of the user, the unique feature of user/brand interaction in WOAs promotes eWOM, which answers RQ2. Furthermore, it has a positive effect on user-user interaction, as a single "Like" and/or a short comment can be instrumental in maintaining social ties. Thus, as indicated in the conceptual framework, the WOA feature addresses economic, social and cultural aspects, thereby enhancing user experience via perceived usefulness. Simultaneously, perceived ease-of-use increases the likelihood of purchasing decisions and facilitates positive eWOM, and ultimately user acceptance of WeChat products, which answers RQ3 and RQ4.

Overall, the findings of this literature review-based study fill a significant gap in the research on WeChat as a platform for business to influence targeted consumers purchase intentions, which helps outline the practical and managerial implications for businesses who are considering using WeChat to generate sales and customers through e-marketing. Within the background of WeChat's being the No.1 online social service in China and its integrating multiple practical functions mentioned before, WeChat marketing via official accounts offers marketers a powerful way to connect with consumers. From the perspective of theoretical contribution, this study to some extent contributes to applying the methodology of narrative literature review. In particular, the conceptual framework based upon reviewing literature, together with five propositions presented in the previous chapter, offers some insights into how review and analysis of literature can be combined effectively.

In terms of limitations, since this dissertation is literature review-focused, the coverage and quality of the literature reviewed is of great importance. The majority of references cited were identified on academic journal databases including Google Scholar, and were supplemented with resources and information from other reliable online sources, including a variety of statistics published online. Special care was taken to ensure the reliability and authenticity of the research references. One limitation of the review related to the newness of the topic (WeChat was launched in 2011), and few book-length studies have been published on this topic compared to well-established topics such as offline branding, consumer behaviour, and so forth. This made it harder to be systematic and comprehensive when the research topic is so new. Thus, although the conceptual framework developed for this study extends current scholarly research on mobile marketing, because mobile marketing is relatively new in the realm of social media marketing, its theoretical foundation is still in development. A future study could be designed to validate the research model by exploring the research propositions and collecting empirical data, which would enable more researchers to conduct studies on similar mobile media platforms.

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