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A Three-part Framework for Understanding People's Everyday Practices on WeChat

By:

Jiaxun Li

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Department of Sociological Studies

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Abstract

Highlighting the comprehensive characteristics of WeChat and its embeddedness in everyday life, this thesis explores the role of a 'three-part model,' made up of user, platform and mobile phone, in mediating what people do with WeChat. This research emerged from a hypothesis that an inclusive framework for understanding people's everyday practices with social media is needed, and the thesis proposes such a framework mobilising the three elements listed above: user, platform, and mobile device. Drawing on ethnographic interviews (with linked diaries) with 41 WeChat users and analysis of 50 documents, four significant themes emerged. These relate to: WeChat and intimacy; WeChat users' reluctance to share; monetised socialisation on WeChat; and users' perspectives on everyday data mining on WeChat. These themes speak to the three-part model in different ways. Whilst each element of the three-part model shapes the ways in which WeChat relates to intimacy, the user element of the three-part model plays a dominant role in how WeChat users engage in (non-)sharing. Whilst users' heterogeneous everyday monetary practices on WeChat are constituted through an intersection of all of the three parts of the model, WeChat users' different levels of understandings and responses to data mining are shaped primarily by the platform and mobile phone elements, with the user element receding into the background. In the thesis, I demonstrate the usefulness of the three-part model for researching people's everyday practices on WeChat, and in doing so, I advance a framework for studying what people do with social media. Thus the thesis makes a number of original contributions to core debates in social media studies, in relation to intimacy, sharing, monetisation, and data mining.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 A Typical Day with WeChat

It is 6 am in Shenzhen,¹ and 26-year-old journalist Mia is woken by her alarm. She reaches out to her mobile phone on the nightstand and checks unread WeChat messages. After quickly replying to personal messages, she checks WeChat Moments (similar to Facebook's News Feed, a place where users post, comment and 'like') to see what her friends are up to and the interesting things they are doing. It is 7.45 am, Mia is on her way to work. She stops by Starbucks and orders a Grande double shot Americano, paying with WeChat Pay, to which her credit card is linked, and gets her Starbucks loyalty card scanned on WeChat. She reads two articles about fashion from WeChat Official Accounts (the WeChat equivalent of a blog or a Facebook page, where individuals, organisations and companies are all able to create an account, provide users with news and articles, and interact with their subscribers) to which she subscribes. She shares one of the articles with her comments on WeChat Moments when she is on the underground. When she arrives at work, she logs on to her WeChat desktop by using the WeChat QR scanner within her mobile phone to scan the QR code prompted on the office computer screen (similar to the WhatsApp web log-in procedure). Mia checks WeChat work groups and carefully edits the messages to be sent within groups to construct a professional self-image. She sends an agenda in the form of a Word file to her team members before the routine pre-editing morning meeting on WeChat desktop. It is noon, Mia sits in the social space after lunch, feeling bored and sleepy. She unlocks her mobile phone, clicks WeChat games, called '*Tiao Yi Tiao*',² to battle the boredom. The game is interrupted by a chat thread from her friends who are discussing a reality TV show – which she missed the previous evening when she was working overtime – within their private WeChat group. When Mia is off duty, she and her colleagues go to their favourite hangout. They browse the menu and place their order directly on WeChat and make payments separately through WeChat Pay.

1. Shenzhen, a modern metropolis in south eastern China that connects Hong Kong to Mainland China. It is the birthplace of WeChat's parent company, Tencent.

2. A mini game on WeChat, which roughly translates to 'Jump Jump'. Users can access the game without downloading or installing an additional app. It features 'a stickman that hops from platform to platform, the distance it jumps controlled by how long the player holds their press. If the stickman misses a block, the game is over' (Liao, 2018). Users are able to share their scores and compete with their friends on WeChat.

After dinner, Mia waits outside the restaurant for the taxi she has booked through WeChat while making a WeChat voice call with her partner. She gets home at 9.30 pm and checks WeChat messages and Moments updates before going to sleep.

WeChat is a Chinese mobile social media application that launched in 2011. It has gradually become a global phenomenon, operating outside China, and is available in a range of countries including the UK. At the time of writing, it is claimed that there are 1.1 billion monthly active users from a wide range of age groups around the world (WeChat, 2021). The above account is an adaptation of a WeChat-related diary kept by one of the participants in this research. The incorporation of WeChat into all aspects of Mia's typical day indicates two things about WeChat. One, the all-inclusive character of WeChat: it shows that WeChat has moved beyond the framework of a social networking service and expanded to encompass a wide range of services, both social and non-social. Two, the embeddedness of WeChat in everyday life: the account illustrates the ways in which WeChat organises Mia's everyday life, meeting demands for her daily necessities. WeChat enables both individual and relational practices: from sustaining personal relations to conducting work-related conversations, from consuming information to engaging in leisure activities, from taking an order to booking a ride. The place of WeChat in the moments of Mia's day is simultaneously fleeting and transitory, such as making payments and getting her loyalty card scanned, and prolonged and focused, including reading articles and checking messages and status updates. The all-inclusive characteristic of WeChat and its thorough embeddedness in individuals' everyday lives makes it worthy of scholarly attention.

Mia's narrative is also indicative of the significance of three elements in her practices in relation to WeChat. First, as a WeChat user, Mia shows the ways in which she adapts and incorporates WeChat into her everyday life. For example, she presents herself to working relations in the construction of WeChat messages; she shares an article as well as her feelings and opinions in WeChat news feeds; she maintains personal and intimate relationships on WeChat; and she connects her bank details with WeChat to access and make mobile payments. Second, as a social media platform, WeChat provides a comprehensive experience by expanding its services into different spheres and highlighting its relevance and centeredness in addressing the everyday needs of users. It is thoroughly integrated into Mia's

everyday life, re/organising the way Mia expresses, shares, connects, socialises, works, makes purchases and spends her leisure. Third, it is Mia's mobile phone that provides the base through which she accesses WeChat and to which she returns every now and then. Her mobile phone is also the first thing Mia reaches for when she wakes up in the morning, the last thing she makes contact with before going to bed, and an important object which is constantly put to use throughout the day and habitually carried on her person. As such, the user, platform and mobile device all matter in Mia's everyday practices in relation to WeChat. I therefore bring these three elements together in a three-part model that I deploy in the thesis as a mechanism for making sense of people's everyday practices in relation to WeChat.

1.2 What WeChat Is and Why Researching It Matters

We can see that WeChat as an all-inclusive app that offers users integrated and wide-ranging services. In Western society, people connect with each other through WhatsApp and Facebook, individuals share content and communicate via video platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, citizens consume news and organise events and campaigns on Twitter, consumers look for books and goods on Amazon, customers place food orders on Deliveroo, passengers schedule rides through Uber, and travellers manage their trips with Airbnb and TripAdvisor. While there is a wide range of digital platforms specialising in meeting users' specific requirements in the West, WeChat caters for nearly all the needs of its users. Users can manage their basic needs and access heterogeneous services without switching between WeChat and other platforms – without leaving WeChat. As such, WeChat forms a new way for individuals to manage their everyday lives. WeChat's motto is 'WeChat, a lifestyle'³ and its core value, declared in parent company Tencent's official website, is 'to enrich the lives of Internet users'⁴. More discussion about WeChat's aim of building a comprehensive platform will be presented in Chapter 3.

Standing in contrast to other digital platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo, which were designed to run on desktop computers and web browsers and then adapted for mobile devices, WeChat was developed as a mobile application. This suggests the inseparability

3. See WeChat official website: <https://open.weixin.qq.com>

4 . See Tencent official website: <https://www.tencent.com/en-us/about.html>

between the platform and the mobile device, meaning that the experience of WeChat is embedded into mobile devices. Despite the later launch of its web version, WeChat requires users to have the app installed on a supported mobile phone for authentication to log onto WeChat desktop. As shown in Mia's example, she accesses versatile services that WeChat provides through her mobile phone and accesses WeChat desktop with the help of her phone. Consequently, WeChat is a mobile-first and mobile-specific platform, which has become a 'standard' part of the mobile device equipment (Goggin, 2014). That is, WeChat and the mobile phones on which it runs are interdependent.

Given what I have discussed above, I argue that it is important to research WeChat for several reasons. First, WeChat is widely used and increasingly embedded in everyday life. A study of China's mobile social media landscape use by Thomala (2020) reveals that Tencent's WeChat is the most popular mobile social media app, with 73.2% of respondents saying that they used it frequently in a survey conducted in October 2019. Industrial reports also show the dominance of WeChat in individuals' everyday lives. For example, the WeChat Impact Report 2018 claims that WeChat market penetration in China is 79% and WeChat accounts for 34% of overall mobile data traffic in China (WeChat, 2018). According to an Internet Trends report by Kleiner Perkins (Figure 1.1), WeChat received 29% of all the time spent on mobile apps in China on an average day in a month: 'approximately 900 million hours a day out of a total of roughly 3.1 billion hours of mobile app usage took place in WeChat' (Meeker, 2017, p.204).⁵ As I noted earlier, WeChat is intimately incorporated into everyday routine practices and a way through which individuals organise and manage their everyday lives. The scale of adoption of WeChat in Chinese society requires sociological enquiry into what people do with WeChat in their everyday lives. Further discussion about the relationship between WeChat and the everyday will be presented in the next section.

5. This is the most recent figure of time spent on WeChat and other mobile apps in the Chinese social media landscape published at the time of writing.

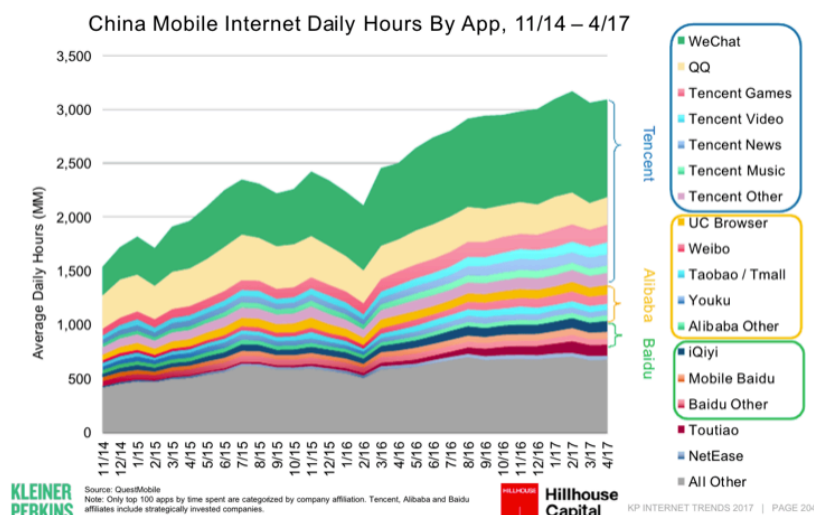


Figure 1.1 Average time spent on mobile apps in China
 (Source: <https://www.kleinerperkins.com/perspectives/Internet-trends-report-2017/>, accessed 1 May 2017)

Second, the comprehensiveness of WeChat challenges conventional notions of social media as serving distinct and separate purposes. In 2013, van Dijck pointed out that there were four types of social media, including social networking sites, user-generated content sites, online trading and shopping sites, and game and entertainment sites. However, she noted that social media were increasingly developing beyond these categories and merging elements to dominate their fields (2013a). Facebook, for example, enables users to network and share content while experimenting in trading and hosting games. In a Facebook blog post, Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, also laid out a new direction for Facebook that shifts its focus from social sharing to private messaging and the provision of diverse services, including ‘calls, video chats, groups, stories, businesses, payments, and commerce’ (Zuckerberg, 2019). However, what Facebook is trying to build has existed for some time in the form of WeChat in China. WeChat provides people with wide-ranging and integrated services in a way that other platforms do not. It is the all-inclusiveness and comprehensiveness of WeChat that makes it distinct and worthy of study.

Third, WeChat is becoming increasingly important and gaining global attention. *The Economist* (2016) named WeChat ‘the future of social media and mobile Internet’; *The New York Times* asserted that WeChat is changing the Internet (Kessel and Mozur, 2016; Lu, 2019); and *The Guardian* described WeChat as the ‘everything to everyone’ (Arthur, 2016) and ‘the

vision of our digital future' (Harris, 2019). The coverage reflects that WeChat is possibly a model for where other social media platforms could head and where the future of the Internet may lie. As mentioned before, tech companies like Facebook are taking notice and attempting to provide similar heterogeneous and integrated services. According to a *New York Times* commentary, the WeChat model has been gaining global attention and 'might be the first thing that is going in reverse' while the changing Internet and infrastructural innovation has flowed mostly from the West to China (Lu, 2019). In other words, WeChat can be a possible platform model for what will happen in the rest of the world. The significance of the global phenomenon of the mega-platform necessitates research. Notably, this research is not to differentiate between Western and non-Western platforms, but to differentiate between WeChat and other platforms.

Fourth, the characteristics of WeChat can help to develop conceptual insights into the relationships between the user, platform, and mobile phone, the elements of the three-part model that are central to my analytical approach in this thesis. As the extract at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, what Mia does with WeChat is oriented by her decisions and practices of self-representation and sharing, driven by the personal and professional connections as well as the versatile services afforded by the platform, and facilitated by the intimate relationships she has developed with her mobile phone and by the deep entanglement of the platform and mobile phone. Thus, the user, platform, and mobile devices are essential to the understanding of users' everyday practices and experiences in relation to WeChat. I mobilise these elements to study what people do with WeChat, as I explain below.

1.3 WeChat and Everyday Life

Mia is not the only user who incorporates WeChat into her daily routines. Early in 2017, China Channel, a consultancy which focuses on WeChat, shared a blog post about the schedule of a typical WeChat user (as shown in Figure 1.2), based on statistics from the WeChat team (Brennan, 2017). It demonstrates how entrenched WeChat has become in users' quotidian life by showing a timeline on which their engagements with the platform are marked. The timeline, of an average and representative user, implies that a host of people keep their daily routines in relation to WeChat, in a similar way that Mia does. The illustration suggests that

WeChat has blended into the rhythms of everyday life and this is reflected in the diverse practices that individuals pursue on and through the app. This also shows that WeChat has become a part of everyday life to the extent that in home and living spaces, working and workspaces, mobile and urban spaces – what Moran (2005) calls types of ‘quotidian space’ – its use is commonplace. It is a taken-for-granted means of being and doing, accessing information, socialising, purchasing, and passing time, rather than a marked exceptional practice of ‘going on to WeChat’. As such, WeChat is at the centre of the very structures of individuals’ daily encounters and interactions, mediating the ‘quotidian rhythms’ (Hutchins, 2011) of everyday life.



Figure 1.2 A schedule of an engaged WeChat user (Source: <https://chinachannel.co/wechat-key-trends-report-2017/slide20-4/>, accessed 5 March 2017)

Another recent example of WeChat’s embeddedness in individuals’ everyday lives is its implementation to limit the spread of Covid-19 in China. In February 2020, and as part of its recovery from the coronavirus outbreak, the central government, in collaboration with Tencent, launched the ‘health code’ mini-programme where local authorities can develop their own local health code systems and run these light version apps on WeChat. Users are allowed to access different mini-programmes inside WeChat without first downloading them onto their mobile phones. To start traveling and commuting again, citizens are required to complete a form that asks for personal health information such as body temperature and medical record. The system analyses users’ information and gives them color-coded (green,

yellow, red⁶) designations based on their health rating. The colour of the code is used to identify the likelihood of whether a user poses a contagion risk and whether they have recently contacted someone who is a possible Covid-19 carrier. A great number of provinces and cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Mia's place of residence, Shenzhen, have adopted this system to try to prevent further spread of the coronavirus. According to *ChinaNews*, WeChat's 'health code' mini-programme was available in around 20 provinces and 300 cities across China by the end of April 2020 (Xu, 2020). The code that it gives to users is the only way to prove one's health status upon arrival at a new place. Officials staffing many checkpoints across the country are checking people's health codes. Permission to enter a location (such as a restaurant or a shopping mall), commute via public transport, and travel within or outside the province is only granted for those presenting a green health code on their mobile phones. This implementation of WeChat to support the management of the global pandemic also shows the ubiquity and entrenchment of WeChat in everyday life in China.

Everyday life is also an important topic within sociological research. It has been argued that personal and ordinary aspects of life are often linked to and co-constitutive of the wider structures and processes of social worlds (Back, 2015; Highmore, 2002). As Neal and Muriji (2015) argue, by looking at people's everyday experiences, we can start to understand how macro structural ideas around power are translated and lived in people's lives at the micro level. Therefore, everyday life is conceptualised not only as the routine and ordinary, but more generally as the 'site of translation and adaption' (Neal and Muriji, 2015). As such, adopting an everyday life approach allows for capturing the routine and mundane aspects of social interactions and recognising the ways in which social arrangements and relations are lived, or 'made and unmade' (Neal and Murji, 2015). A sociological focus on the everydayness of WeChat can help uncover how personal and situational everyday encounter and interactions with WeChat (as observed at a micro level) are related to institutional and technical arrangements of WeChat (as observed at a macro level). As such, we can see how WeChat is experienced, performed and coordinated at both personal and societal levels.

6. A green code means that the person is symptom-free and allowed to travel; the yellow signifies potential infection and incomplete self-quarantine; while the red conveys the message that the person is either infected or awaiting a diagnosis for their symptoms. People with either yellow or red codes are not allowed to travel.

The other reason why the everyday matters is that it helps recognise the power embedded in the seemingly insignificant minutiae of life. The ways in which power is embedded in the everyday can be easily overlooked and clouded by the routines and familiarities that dominate the everyday (Neal and Murij, 2015). As Schutz (1964) argues, the rhythmic and repetitive experiences of life may create the sense of taken-for-grantedness and have the potential to be filtered out. Nevertheless, by taking the everyday for granted, users may be accepting certain choices and priorities that are built into it (Hine, 2015). For example, in digital media and technologies studies, it has been argued that 'the process of banalization' of digital technologies can be risky as it may blind people to unfavourable forms of socio-technical power (Graham, 2004), involve users involuntarily consenting to unanticipated outcomes of new forms of data generation and circulation (Beer, 2013), or lead people to accepting certain ideas of how social relations are organised and embedded in technical programming without question (Mackenzie, 2006). These propositions highlight the invisible work that the everydayness of digital technologies does in terms of shaping perceptions and practices and embedding power on a social level. Thus, focusing on everyday life allows us to 'take the mundane seriously' and attend to 'what is at stake in our daily encounters' with seemingly taken for granted and trivial details (Back, 2015, p.821).

Given the increasing relevance and importance of WeChat in nearly all aspects of everyday life, it therefore makes sense to examine WeChat through an everyday lens. Focusing on the everyday can bring to the fore how users' lives are constituted, (re)produced, and experienced in relation to WeChat, and how WeChat shapes their perspectives about the app and how it organises and characterises their day-to-day lives. Understanding the relationship between WeChat and the everyday necessitates researching people's practices in relation to WeChat. Pink (2012) states that practice is the key concept that has been frequently used to approach 'how we live our everyday lives and how processes of change come about' (p.14). Similarly, Scott (2009) suggests that understanding how everyday settings are socially organised requires examination of the underlying rules, routines and regularities of everyday practices. Thus, we can achieve our understanding of WeChat's embeddedness and everydayness by studying what people do with WeChat, or their WeChat practices. This is what I set out to do in this thesis. I use the three-part model I discussed above, bringing

together the user, platform and mobile phone to examine people’s everyday WeChat practices.

Before I provide an overview of what I mean by the three-part model I propose, a preliminary remark on my understanding of two related terms: model and framework. For my purposes, I regard these terms as interchangeable and tend to use both the terms model and framework throughout this thesis. I understand the term *model* as a ‘representation of a specific situation’ (Sabatier, 2007, p.323) in a ‘schematic form’ (Verbrugge, 2018), which contains descriptions of the components and dimensions, and how they might relate to one another, to build explanations of an existing situation and explore the outcomes produced (Scgkager, 2007; Mershon and Shvetsova, 2019). I understand the term *framework* to mean an organised structure of theoretical ideas as well as their relationships that are involved in the research (Maxwell, 2005; Ravitch and Riggan, 2017), which is a general guide and direction to the overall research and provides a way of thinking about and approaching an area (van der Walldt, 2020). In this thesis, I use the term model to introduce three elements – user, platform and mobile device – that I assume as essential mediators in people’s everyday practices with WeChat, and mobilise them into a triangle as shown in Figure 1.3. I also consider the three parts as a framework because they are the core concepts that inform my examination of what people do with WeChat in everyday life, forming the foundation of how I understand this phenomenon. Overall the terms of model and framework emphasise similar aspects of the way I approach and understand people’s everyday practices with social media. In this sense, I consider them as overlapping and so use them interchangeably throughout this thesis.

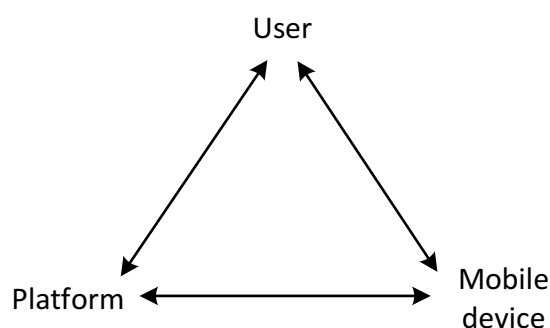


Figure 1.3 The three elements of the three-part model

1.4 Ways of Studying What People Do with WeChat

A number of scholars have established their own analytical approaches and attempted to propose models to understand digital media technologies. For example, in their study of the Sony Walkman, Du Gay and others (1997) suggested a need to study it through five interlinked processes through what is known as the 'circuit of culture' model. This systematic approach consists of representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation (Du Gay et al., 1997). The starting point for the circuit of culture model is the positioning of the Sony Walkman as a particular example of a 'cultural form'. Thus Du Gay and others (1997) propose the above five elements to explore the cultural meaning of Sony Walkman and capture its impact on social relations and practices in contemporary society. In my thesis, I understand WeChat not as a cultural product, but as a technology which surrounds and constitutes us, shaping the way we manage and organise our everyday lives. Rather than focusing on the interplay of culture and society, I explore the relationship between people and digital technology. Therefore, the elements introduced in Du Gay and others' (1997) model are not all relevant to my research. However, their work is inspiring regarding the varied roles of large commercial companies in the constitution of understandings of digital products and the culture they represent. I therefore take into account the role that institutions play in shaping people's everyday practices in relation to social media in my own model.

In her seminal work, van Dijck (2013a) highlights the connected characteristics of social media and considers each individual social media as microsystems that together constitute an ecosystem. Her dissection of individual platforms combines two perspectives: platforms as 'socio-technical constructs' and as 'socio-economic structures'. She analyses three aspects in close alignment when approaching platforms as sociotechnical constructs: a) technology which includes discussion about, for example, (meta)data, algorithms, and interface; b) users, referring to the leverage of user agency in facilitating the improvement of services provided by social media; and c) content, which is tied up with genres and forms provided by the platform, as well as common tastes and desires, social trends and personal preferences. To unpack her understanding of platforms as socio-economic structures, she focuses on three aspects: a) ownership, referring to the ownership status and structure of the platform, i.e. whether it is publicly governed, community based, non-profit based, or corporate-owned; b)

governance, which relates to the entity that regulates the territory of platforms, and how, through what mechanisms they are managed; and c) business models, describing the business strategies of social media platforms, such as the relationship with users and third parties that acquire the personal information of users.

Van Dijck (2013a) provides a comprehensive framework, which is made up of technologies, users, content, ownership models, governance models, and business models. This framework is appropriate to her intention of understanding the development and operation of social media platforms. Unlike van Dijck, my aim is to understand what people do with social media, thus I move from centring the platform to centring practices as an object of study, and so a different kind of framework is needed. I retain the user as a separate part in my model, given my focus. To understand the mediation of social media platforms in people's engagement with them in everyday life, I have combined elements that van Dijck (2013a) introduced, namely technology and business models, in my model under the heading of 'platform'. I have excluded other aspects van Dijck (2013a) proposed in her framework. For example, it is beyond the scope of this research to draw out in-depth analysis of the content being produced or distributed on the platform as this thesis focuses on users' practices in relation to the platform. However, for many platform owners, content is just another word for data streams that flow through their channels (van Dijck, 2013a). Thus content will be underlined in the discussion about data where appropriate in this thesis. In another example, I do not make definitive comments about state regulation in my model. This is because my thesis focuses on the mundane aspect and everydayness of people's practices with social media rather than the political aspect of their usage of and civic engagement with social media. This is also because research regarding digital media issues in China has thus far focused on the relevance and implication of the state, but minimal effort has been directed toward other pressing issues, such as the 'infrastructulisation of platform', which results in platforms' thorough embeddedness in everyday life and affects what people do with them. My research fills this gap. In addition, the special state regulation of the Chinese Internet constitutes an area where usage in terms of political interest and participation can be difficult to research. I explain this further later in the thesis. Instead, I have included the mobile device element in my model. I consider mobile devices important in exploring people's everyday practices in relation to social media platforms because social media platforms have increasingly launched

mobile app versions and are frequently adopted and used through mobile devices. As Willems (2020) argues, mobile phones are seen as connected objects with social media as they function dependently from each other and from the environment, and support the working of the mobile apps. As such, the three elements of user, platform, and mobile device included in my model are intricately intertwined with the research aim and form the foundation of my model. I will elaborate on what I mean by these three parts below.

Previous studies have provided a spectrum of descriptions of what people do with social media either by focusing on users' perceptions, the mediation of platforms, or the mediation of mobile devices. However, to fully understand what people do with social media apps like WeChat, I propose that we need to move beyond a one-dimensional approach and bring together these different mediating elements. My research thus uses a three-part model approach, incorporating the user, platform and mobile phone, as an analytical lens for understanding people's everyday practices in relation to WeChat. This model serves as my theoretical framework in the thesis. It integrates three literatures for researching people's everyday practices in relation to WeChat: a) user self-representation and sharing; b) platform studies; and c) mobile and material studies, aiming to extend current theoretical understandings of each field.

Two concepts that have come to dominate discussions about social media users and that have been widely used in research into what people do on social media are self-representation and sharing. It has been suggested that self-representation is a 'condition of online participation' (Thumim, 2012). This is because individuals have no choice but to represent themselves to connect with others in social media context (Enli and Thumim, 2012; Thumim, 2012). In addition, it has been argued that social media are structured around sharing, both as a function and as what people are invited to do (John, 2017; Kennedy, 2020). This suggests that sharing is 'a constitutive activity' of social media and has been used to describe online participatory practices (John, 2013a; 2013b; 2017). Thus, social media users are required to self-represent in online spaces and the act of sharing becomes an everyday part of participation online. Self-representation and sharing can therefore be seen as both essential social media practices and essential concepts with which to capture what people do with social media. This thesis thus draws on both self-representation and sharing to explore users'

perceptions and understandings of their practices in relation to WeChat as and when appropriate.

As individuals' everyday lives are increasingly organised and managed on digital platforms, their online practices are constructed and framed 'on the basis of what technology proposes, by what it makes possible' (Turkle, 2008, p.131). The growing field of platform studies acknowledges the increasing power platforms have on users by pointing out the four key approaches to platforms and the potential implications of their development, including: the 'politics of the platform' (Gillespie, 2010); the 'platformisation of the web' (Helmond, 2015); the 'platform ecosystem' (van Dijck et al., 2018); and the 'infrastructuralization of the platform' (Plantin et al., 2018; Plantin and de Seta, 2019). Scholars also focus on how the four elements that characterise the workings of the platform, such as affordances (boyd, 2010; Bucher and Helmond, 2018), interfaces (van Dijck, 2013a; 2013b), algorithms (Bucher, 2012; Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Wang, 2020), and data mining (Kennedy, 2016; van Dijck, 2013a), enable and constrain people's everyday experiences and practices with the platform. Here we can see that platforms shape what people do with social media in distinct and complex ways. Therefore, the WeChat platform is a second element in my three-part model.

In an era of mobile social media, most platform practices take place on mobile devices including smartphones and smartwatches. Both mobile and material dimensions of mobile devices have the potential to impact upon people's practices in everyday life and in relation to digital media technologies. Mobile studies consider the mediating role of mobile devices in terms of how mobile technologies engender possibilities and convenience for everyday connections (Ling, 2008; Ni, 2009; Turkle, 2008) and shape how people experience digital and physical places (Okabe, 2009; Farman, 2012), and the way they organise their everyday practices with social media around places (Licoppe, 2017; Frith, 2012). Material studies focus on the materiality of mobile devices; while some pay attention to how mobile devices as objects have faded into the background yet shape people's everyday encounters (Miller, 2005; 2010), others highlight how they are imbued with different meanings by individuals through their engagements and relationships with them (Berger, 2009; Goggin, 2011; Vincent, 2005). This thesis considers mobile devices as another mediator in shaping what people do with WeChat, and thus the mobile device is the third element in my three-part model.

Similar to platform studies and mobile phone studies, the field of media studies is also concerned with the intertwined relationship between human and technical actors. Some media studies scholars draw on the concept of mediation to conceptualise the impact that digital media technologies have on social interactions and everyday encounters and to understand the particular kinds of changes, constraints and possibilities in everyday life that are engendered by digital media technologies (Lievrouw, 2009; Thompson, 1995; Thumim, 2012). Aligning myself with these scholars, I use the term mediation often in this thesis to refer to the intervening process of digital media technologies, like the platform and mobile device, in what people do with WeChat.

In this research, the proposed three-part model which incorporates the user, platform and mobile phone, takes a media practice perspective. Couldry theorises media as practice and highlights the need to ask, 'what are people doing in relation to media in the contexts in which they act?' (2012, p.35). He argues that the openness of the practice-oriented perspective allows for a better account of media consumption and enables a range of new practices to emerge, such as 'searching', 'showing' or 'presencing', which may have been missed by other perspectives (Couldry, 2012). By taking media practice as a starting point for its enquiry, this thesis aligns with Couldry's approach (2012) in attempting to explore what people do with WeChat. This practice approach enables me to capture varying practices as they unfold in relation to WeChat and allows for an understanding of the place of media like WeChat in everyday life.

Thus, the fundamental question this thesis asks is:

- What is the role of the 'three- part model' (made up of user, platform and mobile phone) in mediating what people do with WeChat?

There are three subsidiary research questions:

1. What do people do and how do people understand what they do with WeChat?
2. How does the platform mediate what people do with WeChat?

3. How do mobile devices mediate what people do in relation to WeChat?

Questions 1 to 3 respond to the three elements of the three-part model. Question 1 investigates user perspectives on their everyday practices with WeChat in everyday life. Questions 2 and 3 consider the ways in which the platform and mobile devices shape individuals' everyday practices in relation to WeChat and their perceptions of how their relationships with the platform and their mobile devices mediate their everyday practices. In the section that follows, I outline the thesis structure through which each of these questions are addressed.

Three main methods were selected to complement one another in addressing these research aims: a) ethnographic interviewing, with b) linked diaries, and c) document analysis. I conducted 41 ethnographic interviews in both the UK and China from April to November 2018. In-depth interviewing was selected to obtain people's perspectives on their practices on WeChat, and their perceptions of the roles of the device and platform in mediating what they do with WeChat. Ethnographic elements were incorporated into interviews to observe individuals' embodied interactions with mobile phones and their engagement with the platform in real time. Diaries were used prior to the ethnographic interview to capture the different ways in which participants interact with WeChat in everyday settings. Fifty documents were collected and critically analysed in this research to address aspects related to what the WeChat app does and how it works (on/with mobile devices) in mediating and shaping people's practices from the perspective of the platform. I say more about the methods employed in this research in Chapter 4.

Drawing upon these methods, this thesis argues that the three-part model is a useful framework for researching what individuals do with WeChat in their everyday lives. I argue that we need to take these elements into consideration together to fully capture individuals' everyday practices in relation to WeChat. In particular, the thesis highlights the intimate relationships people develop with WeChat and the ways in which such intimacy is related to each element of the three-part model. It also emphasises that users' reluctance to share as well as the complexities that arise in such reluctance are mediated by the elements of the three-part model, proposing that users act with agency in the decision-making process they

go through when sharing on WeChat. The thesis shows that the everyday monetary practices within the context of WeChat are constituted through the intersection of the three-part model, through a focus on the front-end monetisation of the platform. The variations in users' perspectives on WeChat's data mining suggest that how users perceive and how they respond to data mining are shaped primarily by the platform and mobile phone elements, with the user element receding into the background. Thus this thesis makes several significant empirical contributions, which are developed across the following chapters.

1.5 Thesis Outline

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 draws together a range of sociological and digital media concepts that are central to my research, including self-representation and sharing, the platform and its characteristics, and mobility and materiality of mobile objects. These form the foundation of my three-part model, which I mobilise to understand what people do with social media. The analysis of the literature suggests that the above perspectives only partially explain certain constitutions of people's practices with mobile social media applications. A more inclusive framework for understanding the phenomenon is needed. I propose such a framework, based on mobilising these three elements: user, platform, and mobile device. I situate my research as an examination of how people's everyday practices in relation to social media are mediated by the three-part model.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the digital landscape of China and the development of WeChat. This includes a description of the tech companies, including BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent), Weibo and TikTok, which dominate the Chinese Internet, outlining the digital context in which WeChat was fostered and developed. The chapter moves on to discuss what WeChat is and how it works (with key features and services summarised and visualised), seeking to draw out the 'infrastructuralisation of WeChat' (Plantin and de Seta, 2019) and to capture the specific practices and experiences WeChat offers, which are discussed in greater detail in later empirical chapters. The chapter ends with a review of existing studies of individuals' practices in relation to WeChat and outlines the approach I adopt to research WeChat.

Chapter 4 provides an explanation for the formulation of my research questions and the rationale for the methodology chosen in this research. It discusses research design and the qualitative methods adopted to collect empirical data, including ethnographic interviewing and linked diary-keeping, and document analysis. This chapter also details the collection and analysis of empirical data, addressing the emerging practical issues in this process and considering the ethical issues that informed and limited the research design and fieldwork. The following four chapters examine four themes that emerged from the empirical data.

In Chapter 5, I present the first of the four original empirical chapters, focusing on WeChat and intimacy. In line with the research aims, the intimate dynamics of WeChat are explored through the lens of the three-part model. The chapter discusses the creation and maintenance of intimate connections, emotional attachment to and dependence on the platform, and the intimate relationships between users and their mobile phones. Throughout this discussion, we see how each element of the three-part model shapes the ways in which WeChat relates to intimacy and how such intimacy informs people's everyday practices in relation to WeChat.

Chapter 6 addresses WeChat users' reluctance to share and the complexities and nuances of such reluctance. It nuances understanding of sharing as a straightforward process which users engage in every day, highlighting the three-part model in mediating people's considerations and perceptions of sharing practices. It proposes that users are carefully thinking about and deciding on what to disclose and what to keep private when it comes to sharing on WeChat, rather than simply following what the platform enables and promotes. This chapter allows us to see that WeChat can result in multiple sharing and non-sharing possibilities because individuals manage to have agency in how they use it.

In Chapter 7, I recognise the front-end monetisation of WeChat and discuss the incorporation of money, in the form of WeChat *hongbao* (red packets filled with cash), into individuals' everyday lives. Focusing on the heterogeneous everyday monetary practices within the context of WeChat, including gifting, gaming, messaging and payment, it is found that the way people practise *hongbao* is shaped by the three elements of the three-part model. I suggest that WeChat reframes the configuration of sociality by extending the possibilities of

connections in a monetised way. This offers ways of rethinking and understanding the relationship between money and sociality, between economic activities and social relations.

Chapter 8 investigates users' varied perceptions of WeChat's data mining and recognises privacy as an important theme for users to make sense of data mining. It demonstrates the role of the three-part model, especially the interconnectedness between the platform element and mobile phone element, in mediating users' different levels of understandings and responses to data mining. It also explores users' negotiation of WeChat's data mining and the ways in which they manage their institutional privacy. It also discusses WeChat as an ecosystem and points to future ways in which WeChat might mediate aspects of individuals' everyday lives.

In the concluding chapter, I revisit the research questions and identify the main findings of this research. I demonstrate the usefulness of the three-part model in capturing people's everyday practices in relation to WeChat and outline the core themes of ambivalence, agency, and connection which emerged across the thesis. I present several key findings and how these offer empirical and theoretical contributions to knowledge, under each of these themes. Finally, I share methodological reflections about conducting the research before suggesting directions for future research.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This thesis takes a practice approach to understand what people do with WeChat. Although there are different theories of practice, many practice theorists agree that practices consist of some combination of bodily activities, shared practical understanding, and material objects and technologies in an everyday context (e.g. Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2001; Shove et al., 2007). Of particular relevance for this thesis is the importance of both human and non-human elements in understanding what constitutes a practice in a particular form. The implication is that we need to attend to non-human elements, like platforms and mobile devices, to understand people's everyday practices. Deploying practice theory to understand everyday uses of media technologies, media scholar Couldry (2004) sees media as an 'open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media' (p.117). He shifts the focus from the study of media texts, institutions, and audiences, to practices directly or indirectly in relation to media (Couldry, 2004; 2012). Theorising media as practice thus begs the question, 'what, quite simply, are people doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?' (Couldry 2012, p.39). This practice approach allows for an understanding of the place of media in everyday life and the way in which they are 'embedded in the interlocking fabric of social and cultural life' (Couldry, 2004, p.129). This thesis aligns with Couldry's approach (2004, 2012) in attempting to explore what people do with WeChat through the lens of practices. Following a media practice perspective, the three-part model consisting of three elements – user, platform, and mobile device – is the approach I take to understand people's everyday practices in relation to WeChat. The fundamental question this thesis asks is: what is the role of the 'three-part model' (made up of user, platform and mobile phone) in mediating what people do with WeChat?

This literature review is split into three sections in accordance with the three-part model. I begin by discussing the user part of the model, outlining the two perspectives of individuals' practices in a digital context that have come to dominate recent discussions: self-representation and sharing. I then proceed to discuss the platform part of the model by focusing on the roles that platforms and its four characteristics – affordances, interfaces, algorithms, and data mining – play in how people engage with social media platforms. The

final section relates to the mobile device part of the model, exploring the ways in which the mobility and materiality of mobile devices mediate individuals' practices in everyday life and in relation to digital media technologies.

2.2 Social Media Users: self-representation and sharing practices

Discussion of social media users primarily focuses on practices of self-representation and sharing, personal and intimate relationships, and considerations of privacy. These form the foundation for how I understand the first element of the three-part model. I will discuss these ideas in detail in the subsequent sections and how some of them are understood (differently) in the Chinese context.

2.2.1 Self-representation

Understanding of self-representation

Self-representation is a concept proposed by Goffman (1959), who conceptualises the self as role-playing. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he proposes a theory of self-representation to suggest that individuals create and sustain their self-images by managing and controlling how they present themselves when engaging in social interactions. He takes a dramaturgical approach to understand the self by considering everyday life as multi-staged dramas, individuals as actors, and observers as audiences, and using the term performance to refer to the social activities and connections that take place on a daily basis. He conceptualises social interactions as the front-stage performance of a backstage self by making an important distinction between 'front stage' where a desirable performance occurs in public and 'backstage' where performers can relax and drop the role performed on the front stage. Goffman (1959) also asserts that the self, as a performed actor, makes conscious decisions about what self-image to project and communicates to others as part of 'impression management'. Accordingly, self-representation is a process of negotiating and regulating personal information to persuade audiences of an actor's intended impression. He also highlights that the self is not an entity that is concealed behind the scenes but 'a product of a scene that comes off' (1959, p.245), which is constructed and moulded by different social situations and audiences. As a result, an individual often establishes, develops and adjusts a specific performance which is deemed appropriate for specific audiences and in different social settings.

Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, I see the self as relational, situated, and contextual. In other words, the self is understood as dynamically formed in relation to other people, constructed in response to immediate situations and attuned to contextual affordances. This approach to self is also pointed out by several scholars who suggest that the sense of self cannot be constructed and maintained in isolation from others as these relationship webs can impact on the thoughts and actions of oneself (Burkitt, 2008; Davies, 2015; Smart, 2007). Therefore, as people are embedded in networks of relationships that shape how they make decisions regarding their self-representations, relationships are an important element of the understanding of the user part of the three-part model. More discussion about the relationships will be presented in section 2.2.3.

Important to add here is that the concepts of the self and identity are seen as distinct by some scholars. For example, Jenkins (2008) understands the self as a process of self-identification – people's sense of who they are – and identity as 'a multi-dimensional classification' and a form of categorisation – how people see themselves and others. Similarly, Oysterman and others (2012) argue that 'the self is the feeling of knowing oneself' and identity is 'the dynamic construction of who one is in the moment' (p.70). Yet in their studies, Jenkins (2008) and Oysterman and others (2012) also point out that both the self and identity are formed in relation to others and shaped by the social contexts in which they develop. This means that there are degrees of interconnectedness and the possible overlaps between these two concepts. For my purposes in this thesis, I understand sense of the self and individuals' identities as both emerging within and reflective of the relationships with others. Thus I consider these two related terms as overlapping and so use them interchangeably throughout this thesis.

Digital self-representation

With the rise of social media and the growth of participatory culture, self-representation has proliferated enormously in the digital context. Thumim (2012) points out the importance of understanding people's online practices as self-representation by arguing that self-representation is a 'condition of online participation' (Thumim, 2012). She contends that

users have no choice but to construct and represent themselves to socialise with others on social media platforms. In other words, social media users are required to self-represent in an online context and digital self-representation becomes an everyday part of participation. Thus, the appropriation and take-up of social media are both necessarily and inevitably entangled with the representations of self. Thumim (2012) goes on to argue that the process of self-representation is mediated in certain ways: textually, institutionally and culturally. She suggests that individuals are situated in a textual environment where their behaviours are framed by the technological designed interface with surrounding possibilities and constraints. The less obvious institutional mediation shaping self-representation, which varies in accordance with the industrial structures, business models and company policies of commercial platforms, is also illustrated. In relation to cultural mediation, Thumim refers to users' ability to produce diverse forms of self-representation. She explicitly points out the importance of media literacy in terms of exerting control over one's self-representation when socialising in the digital context. Thumim's (2012) research provides an interpretive framework for analysing self-representation in digital culture, focusing on the different processes mediating self-representations. I agree with Thumim that self-representation is mediated, but I am interested in different elements (platforms and devices) that mediate individuals' self-representation to those that she mentions. Inspired by her work, I will address other mediators that frame and shape self-representation in this research.

While Thumim (2012) sees digital self-representation as a condition of participation, other scholars argue that it has been inflected to self-branding. Hearn (2008) maintains that online self-representations are forms of self-branding as individuals package themselves as commodities and instrumentally use digital platforms to promote themselves. Similarly, Marwick (2013) argues that users intentionally construct a 'strictly edited self' and brand themselves to compete for visibility, attract attention and acquire monetary value. For example, celebrities and influencers perceive themselves as brands through which they can exploit, benefit, and monetise their online self-representations by integrating sponsorship and advertorials into their construction of self-image. Ordinary users also strategically use social media such as Twitter to maintain followers, and to promote themselves as saleable commodities in response to employment uncertainty. The significance of digital platforms as personal branding and monetising tools are thus gradually understood and utilised by

individuals as they can be rewarded with ‘material gain or cultural status’ (Hearn, 2008, p.204). This is partly because gathering public attention, gaining popularity and thus building reputation on digital platforms has become increasingly valued in society (van Dijck, 2012). Thus, people self-brand because contemporary forms of capitalism require them to do so.

Digital self-representation is also understood as a form of self-documentation (Kitzmann, 2003). For example, Sinn and Syn (2014) contend that social media platforms offer new opportunities for rapid documentation of the self and serve as a digital archive of personal stories and histories. Similarly, Zhao and others (2014) observe that some users understand social media as not only arenas of ‘social practice’, but also as archives of ‘personal artefacts’. The archival dimension of social media is also reflected in Good’s (2014) work, which argues that the accumulation of users’ everyday self-presentations has become and is curated as an open-ended ‘exhibition’, coupled with a private or personal desire to preserve those records and moments for the future. The above propositions demonstrate that the recorded online self-representational content constitutes collective moments of everyday life, which thus develop social media’s potential as a place for the documentation of self and a repository of personal memory and experiences.

We can see that self-representation in the digital context is understood in various ways and the assumptions made about digital self-representation are based on Western platforms. However, WeChat – as a distinctively all-inclusive mega platform, which pervades every aspect of everyday life – may transform self-representation in different ways. It is thus essential to recognise whether and how WeChat challenges assumptions made about digital self-representation. In addressing this question, this thesis can contribute towards the theoretical knowledge of digital self-representation by situating it in a non-Western context and in a platform that is distinct from other platforms on which ideas about digital self-representation have been based.

2.2.2 Sharing

Sharing in the pre-digital age

In his book *The Age of Sharing*, John (2017) outlines the concept of sharing as distribution and communication in the pre-digital age. He claims that the distributive sense of sharing is used to describe dividing a material object into parts or portions to benefit one another. It is always framed as a good thing with a 'warm glow around it' (John, 2017) that can only be done 'nicely' (Benkler, 2004), which echoes the common phrase, 'sharing is caring'. This notion of sharing is deeply associated with generosity and altruism (Dreman and Greenbaum, 1973; Harris, 1970) and intrinsically a positive practice with moral implications. Thus, the act of sharing produces social exchange and social interactions and the item being shared is valued and infused with social significance (Wittel, 2011). John (2017) also states that sharing is understood as a passive way of having something in common with other people, including material objects like shared houses or workplaces, and abstract ones like shared beliefs and religion. This meaning of sharing also implies social relations (Heath et al., 2018; Usher and McConnell, 1980). For example, the bond between residents who share a house is strengthened as the mutually occupied house creates an additional link between them; people who share a religion also have agreed morals and values, and relational thinking and behavioural tendencies. The communicative meaning of sharing is also pointed out by John (2017). Sharing as communication is about emotional expression and disclosure of oneself and involves talking about real situations and true feelings with each other (John, 2017), even negative ones (Lupton, 1998). This sense of sharing is a social practice and is central to the creation and development of intimate relationships (John, 2017).

Sharing in the digital context

However, the notion of sharing has been transformed in the digital context. In his seminal works, John (2013a, 2013b, 2017) traces the changes of meaning of sharing, arguing that the scope of sharing has been extended and sharing has come to represent both distribution of content and communication of feeling in the digital context. He also points out what people are encouraged to share by platforms has undergone a gradual change: from describing specific properties to share, such as photos and websites; to 'fuzzy' objects without specifying what to share, such as 'share your world/life'; and then to 'no objects', arguing that platforms

construct sharing as an essential form of practice in a social media context and assume users understand the range of practices that the notion of sharing indicates (John, 2013a). Consequently, John (2013a) highlights that many activities in the digital context fall under the classification of 'sharing', including updating statuses, uploading photos, distributing links, clicking 'likes', and commenting on others' statuses. As such, sharing has become the 'fundamental and constitutive activity' of social media platforms (John, 2013a, p.167). Similarly, Kennedy suggests that 'social media platforms explicitly and strategically locate sharing within a culture of participation' (2014, p.17), and concludes that what people are invited to do within the context of social media is 'post, update, like, tweet, retweet and most importantly, share' (2013, p.132). Thus, social media users' online presence requires sharing. In other words, the term sharing has been used to describe people's online participation (John, 2013b; 2017). Thus focus is given to individuals' sharing practices in this research to understand what people do with WeChat.

As previously alluded to, the notion of sharing is intrinsically associated with pro-social connotations. Such association is promoted and intensified by social media platforms. For example, John (2017) maintains that social media platforms draw on the sense of sharing as constructing positive social relationships to encourage users to share and introduce positive implications for their features. For example, Facebook uses the phrase, 'the people you care about' to refer to those whom users' practices of sharing are intended for, in its description of the 'Share' button (John, 2017). Likewise, Kennedy (2020) observes that social media platforms promote the 'social activities of togetherness' facilitated by their services and heavily use 'open' and 'connected' to structure the pro-social meaning of sharing. According to Wittel (2011), 'whereas sharing in the pre-digital age was meant to produce social exchange' based on generalised reciprocity, sharing in the digital context is 'about social exchange' (p.8). In this sense, the act of sharing thus includes socially-purposed disclosure and communication of personal information and feelings, and at the same time keeping in touch with others. In other words, sharing is not just conducive to personal network creation and maintenance, but the practice itself is considered to be social and stands for sociality.

However, sharing is not only referred to the participation of social media, but it is also the term used by several social media platforms to describe their business-related transactions

with others. In *The Culture of Connectivity*, van Dijck (2013a) points out the dual logic of sharing: sharing as connectedness and sharing as connectivity, arguing that the former relates to users' disclosure of personal information to others while the latter implies the platforms' commercial transactions with third parties. She also claims that social media platforms have deliberately facilitated users to present and share through purposefully designed interfaces such as the ubiquitous 'share' buttons on the platform, to monetize users' information by selling it to marketers and advertisers (van Dijck, 2013a). This point has also been made by John (2013a, 2013b), who argues that the reasoning behind the inclusiveness and the extension of the scope of sharing is a platform's intention to 'mystify' the commercial aspect of its operation and hide the real monetization objectives of the use of the term. More discussion about the monetisation of the platform will be presented in section 2.3.5.

Sharing in China

As mentioned in the previous section, in English, sharing contains two layers of meaning: sharing as distribution and sharing as communication. Given its unique social and cultural characteristics, understandings of sharing are different in China. There is not a single Chinese word or phrase encompassing the meaning of sharing discussed in the Western context. Sharing can be interpreted as both *fenxiang* (分享) and *gongxiang* (共享) in Chinese. I endeavour to isolate the characteristics of these two phrases to explore the meaning they may encompass based on the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary. The indigenous concept of *fenxiang* represents distribution of resources, the character *fen* (分) signifies 'dividing things up, partaking in, and allocating possessions', while *xiang* (享) connotes 'to enjoy' and 'to benefit'. This shares similar meaning with the first explanation of the distributive sense of sharing which is often related to personhood and moral character and creates and regulates social ties. *Fenxiang* can also refer to communication in terms of talking about feelings and emotions. Yet, *fenxiang* as talking often goes together with optimistic sentiments, such as joy and happiness due to the inherently positive connotations of *xiang*, which is different from sharing as a form of communication in a Western understanding, which involves talking about negative feelings and concerns and offering support and assistance (Lupton, 1998).

The other meaning of sharing, as having things in common with others, corresponds to the phrase (共) *gongxiang*, translated as ‘to enjoy together’ in the dictionary. *Gong* denotes ‘common’ and ‘altogether’ and *xiang* suggests ‘having the use of’, both a material object and intangible abstract can be shared in common, such as a property or fate. This meaning of sharing is often linked to collectivism as a symbol of harmony because individuals in collectivistic cultures tend to prioritise the interests of the group they belong to over their personal goals, which usually results in the actions of individuals serving the community or society (Ardichvili et al., 2006; Hofstede, 2001). In other words, community members are responsible with sharing within the group, if needed.

These are the meanings and connotations of sharing that are brought into play when these words are deployed in the context of Chinese social media. In their work, Zhao and John (2020) found that *fenxiang* is the word that is frequently used in the context of Chinese social media and is more appropriate to be used to describe the certain participatory practices than *gongxiang*, such as distribution of personal information and expression of feelings on social media platforms. Indeed, my research participants’ comments reflected their understandings of what they do with WeChat regarding this claim to *fenxiang*. These were often observed in their diary-keeping as well as in the interview setting, making it clear that sharing is equivalent to online participation within the context of WeChat. In this thesis, I explore the meaning of *fenxiang* of the term sharing and the extent to which it is an important aspect of everyday practices in relation to WeChat.

2.2.3 Personal and intimate relationships

As discussed above, looking at self-representational and sharing practices inevitably signifies a focus on relationships. To fully understand the user element of the three-part model, discussions on the personal and intimate relationships become vital.

There is no universal definition of intimacy. The most popular meaning of intimacy, according to Jamieson (2011), is the ‘quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality’. Building on Morgan’s (2011) discussion of ‘family practices’, Jamieson (2011) introduces ‘practices of intimacy’ to describe a range of ‘practices which enable,

generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other'. She notes that intimacy is 'built by practices' which can be found in social interactions and how people conduct themselves within personal relationships, such as families, couples, and friendships, or other relationships such as professional relationships that are 'experienced as and socially recognised as having a close connection' (Jamieson, 2011). For example, parents' practical caring for, giving to, spending time with, showing affection for their children are practices that may develop the intimacy of their relationships. Fried (1984) too sees intimacy as related to practices and argues that intimacy is 'the sharing of one's actions, beliefs, or emotions which one does not share with all' but with significant others (p.211). This suggests the value and substance of intimacy lie in its 'exclusiveness' and 'scarcity' (Fried, 1984). As Reiman (1976) points out, 'the intimacy is constituted not simply by equality and intensity of what we share, but by its unavailability to others' (p.305). Having privileged access to information about the other person, as a form of knowing, according to Jamieson (2011), can be a practice that tends to create intimacy.

With the rise of social media, intimate and personal relationships have been increasingly experienced in a digital context. It has been argued that social media is a venue for 'intimate interactions' (Ito et al., 2009) and is inherently designed to underscore intimate practices and connections. For example, Payne (2014) argues that 'the architecture of online spaces and the etiquette of behaving within these spaces tend to favour the dense proliferation of intimacies with others' (p.2). Similarly, Papacharissi and Gibson (2011) state that social media platforms encourage users to disclose personal information to the public and perform intimate connections online through their default design and interface. As a result, people's intimate relationships are created and maintained in public realms (Miguel, 2018) and their understanding of intimacy is increasingly facilitated by what they can show and what others can see (Ito et al., 2009). Thus social media users represent themselves and share their daily minutiae with regularity to encounter new forms of digital intimacy (Thompson, 2008). The public nature of intimate practices and relationships within the context of social media seems to challenge the exclusiveness and privileged knowledge associated with the concept of intimacy, as previously alluded to. This reflects how the way people both engage in intimate practices and experience intimacy are transformed on social media platforms. Therefore, in my analysis, I explore how users perceive and experience intimate and personal relationships

on WeChat and how their perceptions of intimacy shape their everyday practices with WeChat.

Relationships in the Chinese context have unique characteristics because of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* is defined as a person's network of social relations (Liu, 1983; Yang, 1993). It is closely associated with the social capital that an individual has because it involves favour exchange and reciprocity (Bian, 2019; Hwang, 1987) and is implicitly based on mutual interests and social benefits (Yang, 1994). Thus *guanxi* is also seen as a personal possession which requires careful operation and management (Luo, 1997; Tsang, 1998). In *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, Fei (1992) argues that *guanxi* in China is based on the 'ranked categories of social connections' and 'possesses a self-centred quality... like the ripples formed on the surface of a lake when a stone is thrown into it, each circle spreading out from the centre becomes more distant and at the same time more unimportant' (1992, p.62). In other words, each individual is located at the centre of a range of concentric *guanxi* circles and closeness with others decreases as one moves out. The degrees of intimacy and the differences of social relations are reflected in the distance from the centremost node to the outermost node. This suggests that the distance of the *guanxi* between the self and others and tends to be distinguished by the degree of intimacy (Hwang, 1987). Therefore, when it comes to the discussion of intimate and personal relationships on WeChat, understanding of *guanxi* in the Chinese context is necessary.

2.2.4 Privacy considerations

A significant element of social media usage and in debates about social media is the concept of privacy. This makes privacy worthy of attention in terms of understanding people's self-representational and sharing practices on social media platforms.

There have been several different attempts to approach the concept of privacy. Some scholars conceptualise privacy as 'the right to be left alone' (Warren and Brandeis, 1890) and a right which plays an essential part in 'supporting other moral and political rights and values and deserves legal protection and moral consideration' (Nissenbaum, 2009, p.13). Some argue that privacy is about the control people have over information about themselves (Fried,

1968) and about 'when, how and to what extent information about them is communicated to others' (Westin, 1967, p.7). Thus, privacy can be understood as processes of autonomy over the management of the disclosure and regulation of access to the self. Yet, Nissenbaum (2009) argues that privacy is not just 'a matter of control'. The communication and distribution of personal data must respect people's expectations of the appropriateness of information flows and maintain the specific context in which the information is disclosed – this is what she calls 'contextual integrity' (Nissenbaum, 2009). Thus, privacy is seen as a right, the control over the access to personal information, and the expectation of the 'flow of information' in a given context.

Privacy is becoming less personal and less about 'the private' in the digital context (Livingstone et al., 2019). This is partly due to two reasons. First, social media invites users to 'disclose substantial amounts of personal information' in public realms (Young and Quan-Haase, 2013, p.481) and the easily accessible social information can 'rupture people's sense of public and private and alters the previously understood social norms of the two' (boyd, 2008, p.18). Yet, representing and sharing oneself in the digital context does not mean privacy no longer matters. boyd (2014) argues that people still care about privacy and highlights the complex relationship between privacy and publicness within the social media context by making a distinction between 'being public' and 'being *in* public'. She states that people know what to expect on social media and understand what information is being seen and used by others. What she is suggesting is that people's understandings of private is linked to their expectations. This echoes the notion of 'contextual integrity' proposed by Nissenbaum (2009) mentioned above. She too suggests that practices and interactions on social media cannot clearly be categorised as either private or public because people have expectations of what will happen to the personal information they disclose in a given setting (Nissenbaum, 2009).

Second, as I have mentioned before, digital platforms collect and share users' personal data with different parties for financial gain. This means that individuals are not in control of what information is shared to whom; their personal data can be tracked and analysed by other actors, such as platforms, third parties and regulatory bodies. According to Marwick and boyd (2014), privacy on social media is 'determined through a combination of audience, technical mechanisms, and social norms' (p.1062). As a result of this, to understand privacy in the digital

context, some writers differentiate between social privacy, which refers to the control of access to personal information by other individuals, and institutional privacy, which refers to the mining and reuse of personal data by platforms, other commercial companies and governments (Raynes-Goldie, 2010; Young and Quan-Haase, 2013). It has been argued that social media users are concerned about both social privacy (Ellison and others, 2011; Raynes-Goldie, 2010) and institutional privacy (Kennedy et al., 2015; Quan-Haase and Ho, 2020) and they sometimes take measures and use different techniques to safeguard their information and mitigate potential privacy breaches. In this thesis, I seek to explore users' understanding of privacy on WeChat and whether and how social and institutional privacy is managed and negotiated within the context of WeChat.

There is not a single Chinese word which encapsulates the layered meanings of the English word *privacy*. Privacy can be referred to as *yinsi* (隐私) in Chinese. According to the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary, the character *yin* (隐) means 'covering up and concealment', while *si* (私) represents 'private and selfish interests'. The meaning of *si* (私) is a contrast to *gong* (公) which denotes 'public' and 'common good'. *Yinsi* sometimes implies a shameful action, thing, or occasion that needs to be kept secret from others (Cao, 2005; Wang, 2011). This translation of *yinsi* points to the negative connotations of privacy in China. Thus, privacy can be stigmatised, especially in a collective society where the emphasis is on personal duties to the group or country (Lü, 2005). This is one of the reasons scholars argue that privacy is absent in China. In her research on urban everyday life in Beijing, China, Farquhar (2002) points out the limited space and private activities afforded by living and working conditions, and the vague and ambiguous boundaries between the public and private spheres, and thus concludes that there is a lack of privacy in China. However, privacy in China is gradually changing. Several studies demonstrate users' growing privacy awareness and concerns about it in both offline and online contexts (McDougall, 2002; Yan 2009; Yuan et al., 2013). In my research, I consider individuals' understanding of privacy and privacy-oriented practices on WeChat as a way to gain further insight into what people do with WeChat and what this tells us about privacy in China.

2.2.5 Summary

Overall, this section has clarified how self-presentation as ‘a condition of participation’ on social media (Thumim, 2012) and sharing as ‘a constitutive activity of social media’ (John, 2017), are conceptualised as essential social media practices and essential concepts with which to capture what people do with social media. This thesis thus draws on both self-representation and sharing to explore users’ perceptions and understandings of their practices in relation to social media as and when appropriate. It also discussed intimacy and privacy, which are seen as essential aspects of social media usage to understand users’ practices of self-representation and sharing. These discussions offer an interesting array of ideas that can be adapted when understanding the user element of the three-part model. Thus, the first research question of the thesis is: *what do people do, and how do people understand what they do with WeChat?*

However, as can be seen above, users are not the only actor that plays a role in their everyday practices in relation to social media. Their online practices are constructed and framed ‘on the basis of what technology proposes, by what it makes possible’ (Turkle, 2008, p.131), especially when their everyday lives are increasingly organised and managed by digital technologies. As such, this thesis will draw upon the other mediators, such as the platform and mobile devices which play a part in what people do with social media, as discussed below.

2.3 Social Media Platforms and Their Characteristics

While platforms strategically present themselves as neutral intermediaries, scholars argue that quite the contrary, platforms actively and substantively mediate what people do with them (e.g. Gillespie, 2010; Nobel, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). As Langlois (2013) argues, the objective of social media platforms is to ‘tell us what we should do, what we want, how we should feel, who should be our next friend, and so on’ (p.54). Aligning myself with these scholars who see social media platforms as not neutral, this section discusses the role of the second element in the three-part model in mediating what people do with social media platforms. The focus on platform requires attention being paid to both social media platforms and their characteristics, such as affordances, interfaces, algorithms, and data mining. In what

follows, I explore the above, attending to how these different actors work and relate to each other in shaping individuals' perceptions of and practices with the platform.

2.3.1 Platform

This section discusses four distinct approaches that attempt to capture the significance of the development of platforms at key moments: the 'politics of the platform' (Gillespie, 2010); the 'platformisation of the web' (Helmond, 2015); the 'platform ecosystem' (van Dijck et al., 2018); and the 'infrastructuralization of the platform' (Plantin et al., 2018; Plantin and de Seta, 2019).

The term *platform* is increasingly used to describe large technology companies. According to Gillespie (2010), it emerged as a deliberate strategic choice for these companies to define the online services they provided. Gillespie (2010) argues that this notion of platform has a 'semantic richness' which positions the platform as a computational infrastructure and architectural structure, and at the same time its meaning can be comprehended figuratively, in a political and sociocultural sense. According to Gillespie (2010), social media are platforms 'not necessarily because they allow code to be written or run, but because they afford an opportunity to communicate, interact, or sell' (p.351). Taking YouTube as an example, Gillespie (2010) argues that it carefully 'crafts a role and a set of expectations that is acceptable to each relevant constituent', such as end users, advertisers, and clients, and serves their own financial interests, while 'resolving or at least eliding the contradictions between them' (p.353). This is the 'discursive work' that a platform undertakes in describing itself as a platform (Gillespie, 2010).

For Helmond (2015), platforms have become so ubiquitous and powerful that it is necessary to talk about 'platformisation,' to refer to the 'extension of the platform into the rest of the web' and the process of 'making external web data become platform-ready' (p.8). She argues that social media platforms enable third party developers and webmasters to build their apps and websites upon and integrate their services and content into the platform infrastructures by offering Software Development Kits (SDKs) and Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) . Doing this enables social media platforms to structure the data flows between platforms and

third parties, and capture user data generated from external digital spaces (Helmond, 2015). Helmond (2015) argues that platformisation weaves the social media platform and the rest of the web together, and the resulting computational infrastructures and informational resources constitute the power of platforms.

Building on Helmond's work on platformisation, and focusing on the connective qualities of online platforms, van Dijck and her co-authors (2018) conceptualise platforms as ecosystems. Digital platforms have grown in scale and gained a level of usage such that they now organise essential public utility sectors, such as urban transport, health care, journalism, and education (van Dijck et al., 2018). As a result, public bodies are a part of the platform ecosystem and our everyday life is increasingly modulated by an assemblage of networked platforms. Thus van Dijck and others (2018) argue that platforms are not single applications, but rather, they are programmable digital architectures that bring into 'interaction users, corporate entities, and public bodies' (p.4). They are ecosystems. This suggests that platforms are technological, economic and cultural configurations, rather than being merely technical mechanisms that enable varying types of user interactions (van Dijck et al., 2018). And in turn, this indicates the increasing power of digital platforms to shape how society is organised and the conditions of public discourse and public value.

The development of the platform brings Plantin and others' (2018) attention to the convergence of platforms and infrastructures – what they call the 'infrastructuralization of the platform'. They argue that platforms are gradually gaining infrastructural properties of ubiquity, scalability, taken-for-grantedness, and reliability. They further point out that platforms function as infrastructures because they 'link independently developed and maintained apps while remaining as a centrally designed and controlled system' (Plantin et al., 2018, p.301). For example, Facebook 'reaches out' to form a seamlessly interactive network by allowing other websites and applications to interrelate with Facebook, and then 'locks' them into a landscape where their development needs to align with Facebook's business models and content distribution strategies (Plantin et al., 2018). Thus, major platform corporations have become the 'modern-day equivalents of the railroad, telephone, and electric utility monopolies of the late 19th and the 20th centuries' (Plantin et al., 2018, p.307).

Such infrastructural expansion of the platform is also observed by Plantin and de Seta (2019) in relation to WeChat. They note that the massive scale of usage as well as the increasing number of services that are integrated into the platform, and the embeddedness of WeChat in every aspect of the Chinese society, confirm WeChat as an infrastructure (Plantin and de Seta, 2019). However, the process of infrastructuralization is distinct between Facebook and WeChat. Facebook maintains its infrastructural power by ‘accumulating external dependencies through computational and organisational partnership’ with other companies and accumulating a variety of ‘platform instances’, including Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Helmond et al., 2019, p.141). Yet WeChat achieves its infrastructural status by enabling external partners and applications to run on and build upon the platform and ‘enclosing growing amounts of information and interactions inside the platform’ (Plantin and de Seta, 2019, p.261). This opens the door for WeChat to become an infrastructure that underpins the operations of other platforms. The discussion about infrastructural changes of platforms has been focused on their macro and top-down properties, yet little attention has been paid to whether and to what extent these platforms feel like or can be understood as infrastructure to the people who use them. This is what I intend to explore in this thesis. This matter, because a bottom-up exploration of the infrastructuralization of the platform can move us beyond the potential implications of WeChat and enable understanding of what actually happens as a result of the embeddedness of WeChat in individuals’ everyday lives.

2.3.2 Affordances

Originally introduced in a natural environment (Gibson, 1979) and then adopted in the technological environment, the concept of affordance is used to refer to what material artefacts such as digital media technologies allow users to do (Bucher and Helmond, 2017). In social media studies, it is understood as the larger environment in which the platform operates and ‘as a key term for understanding and analysing the relations between social media and users’ (Bucher and Helmond, 2017, p.235). For example, boyd (2010) introduces four affordances of social media which are: persistence, which indicates the automatic recording and archiving of posted online content; replicability, referring to the duplication of the content; scalability, which means the potential visibility and circulation of the content;

and searchability, showing that the content can be available and assessable through searching online (boyd, 2010). She argues that these affordances can 'control information and configure interactions' and structure users' engagements in these technological environments (boyd, 2010, p.45). Baym (2010) argues that affordances as the 'consequences of technologies' provide users with potential possibilities as well as limiting them in some ways, so it is important to attend to the 'actual practices of use as those possibilities and constraints are taken up, rejected, and reworked in everyday life' (p.70). Thus the concept of affordance helps capture the relation between the platform environment and the practices made possible and is a relevant concept in my research to analyse the mediation of the platform.

2.3.3 Interfaces

In her work, van Dijck (2013a; 2013b) points out the external and internal interfaces of social media platforms. The external interfaces, also known as visible interfaces, are available to the front-end users, which structure users' practices through the information architecture, including technical features, regulatory features, and elements and pathways on screen. For example, the 'Share' and 'Like' buttons, icons, scroll bars, and the rule that a personal profile is required before creating an account. Drawing upon the changes implemented in the interfaces of LinkedIn, van Dijck (2013b) found that LinkedIn navigates users' professional performance on-site by changing its visible interface from the facilitation of group discussion between professionals through 'contacts', 'newsfeeds', and 'network updates', to the uniform and chronological presentation of individuals' professional information and experience. This demonstrates how the platform's visible interfaces directly steer connections between users and content, and channels users' modes of practices in relation to the platform (van Dijck, 2013b). In other words, social media platforms are essentially designed spaces that encourage users to engage in particular practices through its external interface.

In contrast to the external interfaces, the internal interfaces link 'software to hardware and human users to data sources' (Fuller, 2008, p.149) and can only be seen by the platform owner. Platforms allow developers and companies to build their services on the platform by offering Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) (van Dijck, 2013a). An API is an 'interface

provided by an application that lets users interact with or respond to data or service requests from another program, other applications, or Web sites' (Murugesan, 2007, p.36). For example, Facebook opens up its platform and provides third parties with APIs which allow them to 'integrate their websites and apps with Facebook data and functionality' (Helmond, 2015, p.4), as mentioned earlier. The internal interfaces facilitate the exchange of the datasets between Facebook and those who build their services on top of the Facebook, and thus enable the third parties to collect and analyse the data and then display targeted marketing content to individuals users, such as the sponsored ads users encounter in their news feeds. This shows how the 'coded information gets translated into personal experience' and are blended into the platform's narrative structure in the form of advertisements (van Dijck, 2013a, p.31). It is clear that users' online experience is also affected by the internal interfaces, although they are concealed to the users.

The external interfaces are designed to facilitate the connections between the platform and users while the internal interfaces are intended to improve the connections between the platform and third parties. The visibility and availability of aspects of the external interfaces are informed by the internal ones (van Dijck, 2013a). Thus it is vital to explore how individuals' everyday practices are guided and shaped by WeChat interfaces. The platform interface is the other concept that can be applied in the study of the mediation of the platform.

2.3.4 Algorithms

To engineer users' online practices, 'interface technologies translate relationships between people, ideas and things into algorithms' (van Dijck, 2013b, p.202). Algorithms are defined as a sequence of programmed instructions that are followed to produce desired outputs from certain input data (Kitchin, 2017; van Dijck, 2013a). Yet they are not just mathematical formulas that encode and analyse, but are shaped socially and work contextually (Beer, 2017; Bucher, 2018). As Gillespie (2014) points out, we might see algorithms not just as codes with consequences, but as 'the socially constructed and institutionally managed mechanism (p.192). Goffey (2008) too argues that algorithms have material effects on end users as they 'do things' and 'their syntax embodies a command structure to enable this to happen' (p.17).

Algorithms are mechanisms that manage what users access and get to see when engaging with the platform. They encode users' everyday practices and personal preferences, make decisions about the importance, usefulness, and relevance of information to a specific user, and then provide users with targeted guidance in the form of automated and personalised recommendations (Colbjørnsen, 2018; Bucher, 2017; Wang, 2020). For example, algorithms presume what products users 'might also like' on Amazon by analysing their profiling data, purchase patterns, and browsing histories and calculating the relations between taste and buyer's preference. Algorithms also automatically create customised videos and photos as part of the 'review of the year' to users based on what they have posted on Facebook. These are the tasks that algorithms perform in managing the flow and visibility of the content users may encounter on platforms. In doing so, algorithms format the choices of users' online experience, cultivating users' tastes at both individual and societal levels (Beer, 2013) and shaping 'what users discover and how they do so' (Morris, 2015, p.451).

Algorithms also assist users in building connections in specific ways. In her research, Bucher (2012) observes that platforms direct the way people connect with others by algorithmically calculating the frequency of the interactions between users and granting forms of visibility to some 'friends' over others on one's personal News Feed. For instance, a friend that a user often 'likes' and comments on is assigned more visibility by algorithms than others; or a post with more comments and likes is more likely to appear within others' view. Bucher (2012) thus proposes the notion of 'algorithmic friendship' to understand the form of connections that are 'programmatically organised and shaped' by social media platforms (p.5). According to van Dijck (2012) 'what is important to understand about social network sites is how they activate relational impulses which are in turn input for algorithmically configured connections – wrapped in code – generating a kind of engineered sociality' (p.161). This suggests that online sociality is not merely a result of the social interactions between users but an 'engineered construct'. Clearly, the work that algorithms do to connect people has been identified as important. Thus this thesis attempts to explore the impact that algorithms have upon the way users relate to others and the relationships they forge with other people within the context of WeChat.

Moreover, through algorithms, platforms contribute to the construction of one's identity. The data users create through their engagements with platforms enable the platform to have the potential to assemble a digital self. This is what Cheney-Lippold (2011) refers to as 'a new algorithmic identity', which means the 'identity formation that works through mathematical algorithms to infer categories of identity on otherwise anonymous beings' (p.165). He argues that users' preferences, habits, and purchases are tracked and reused as inputs, according to which they are 'profiled', sorted into 'measurable types' and served with targeted advertisements (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Similarly, the idea that automated classification of individuals into categories is ubiquitous in the digital context is also noted by Szulc (2019). He argues that social media platforms encourage users to present more details about themselves and share more personal data – what he calls the 'abundant self' – to maximise the algorithmic connections between users and third parties. Such an 'abundant self' enables the platform to create a detailed profile for users which may contribute to algorithmic predictions that aim to increase the likelihood of their engagements with the presented advertisements (Szulc, 2019). Thus, algorithms produce categories of identity from users' self-representational and sharing practices in relation to the platform, and such algorithmic user profiling is used to anticipate their potential needs. Considering the comprehensive characteristics of WeChat, the platform generates numerous and varied data sources, including financial information, to be combined to create insights, make predictions, expand profiles and infer preferences. I will explore how users are being profiled by WeChat algorithms to gain further insight into the mediation of the platform in users' everyday practices with WeChat.

Clearly, algorithms – as fundamental hidden technical constructs – structure and sort individuals' online traces and in turn 'feed back' into users' online connections and practices. However, the algorithmic suggestions that guide users in what to do with the platform can be inappropriate (Willson, 2017). In his research of users' responses to the satisfaction of the performance of algorithms, Colbjørnsen (2018) found that Amazon's algorithms are occasionally prone to making unfavourable connections in shopping suggestions, such as recommending products like breast bump to a user who looks at books on grief. Bucher (2017) also found that algorithmic recommendation can be wrong due to the ill-conceived and even offensive connections made by algorithms. For example, Facebook algorithms display ads for

wrinkle cream and diet food for middle-aged women, and present past photos of a user's recently deceased family member as part of the 'year in review'. These examples reflect how algorithmic profiling reinforces the stereotypical assumptions about one's identity and reveals how incapable the algorithmic system is of scrutinising and understanding personal experience within complex social and emotional contexts (Bucher, 2017). This calls into question people's encounters with and perceptions of algorithms in their everyday practices with the platform. Thus this thesis seeks to explore how people perceive algorithm-oriented experiences on WeChat and whether and how they work against the algorithmic interventions in everyday life.

2.3.5 Data mining and monetisation

Algorithms cannot meaningfully function without a dataset (Gillespie, 2014) which is supported by data mining. According to van Dijck (2013a), the power of the platform lies in its ability to include algorithms for processing data as well as to collect (meta)data. Social media data mining refers to a diverse range of actors concerned with gathering, extracting, categorising, analysing, storing, and making sense of the data intentionally or unwittingly disclosed on social media, by means of different in-platform, free-to-use, and commercial tracking tools (Kennedy, 2016). The mined data can be shared with marketers and advertisers because, as van Dijck (2013a) argues, social media platforms are programmed with a specific objective for the practices that take place within them: monetise data resources for financial gain. This suggests that platforms encode users' online practices into data at the same time and by the same means that they may use to exploit them.

Terranova (2000) considers users' online participation as free labour and highlights that users are being commodified by platforms' interests while pursuing their own interests. Building on her work, Andrejevic (2010) argues that social media platforms capture the data user generated online and make them profitable in online markets. Thus social media are seen as part of the broader 'structural affordances of a capitalist economy in which users' free labour is exploited for the benefit of companies' (Andrejevic, 2010, p.312). Similarly, Fuchs (2014) argues that social media can be 'a commercial, profit-oriented machine that exploits users by commodifying their personal data and usage behaviour and subjects these data to economic

surveillance so that capital is accumulated with the help of targeted personalised advertising' (p.304). In other words, social media extract value from user practices in relation to the platform and transform users' online data into tradable commodities. Thus, social media data mining techniques open up the possibility of new forms of exploitation which allows platforms to monetise user-generated content and position users within networks of marketing and advertising. For this reason, users' shared content and self-representational data have become 'monetisable assets' (Kennedy, 2016, p.26) to social media platforms. We can see that most research regarding the monetisation of social media platforms focuses on the back end. Yet the new, emerging front-end monetisation, for example, in the form of WeChat red packets (digital red envelopes stuffed with digital money), also needs exploring. This thesis offers the exploration of the different forms of monetisation and monetary relationships on WeChat, as I discuss later in this thesis.

The implications of social media data mining have been highlighted by some scholars. Several studies have shown that social media data mining results in the invasion of users' privacy (Kennedy, 2015; Marwick et al., 2017; Quan-Haase and Ho, 2020). This is partly because, as I have discussed before, people have expectations of what may happen to the personal information they disclose on social media (Nissenbaum, 2009). For example, social media users may expect their 'public' posts to be read by their followers or friends, but not used in an academic study or for commercial interests. They may be comfortable with the former, but not the latter. Ignoring those expectations can be seen as a violation of people's rights of privacy (Nissenbaum, 2009). This part is relatively brief as some relevant studies have been reviewed in the discussions about digital privacy in section 2.2.4.

Social media data mining is also seen as a form of surveillance. Trottier (2012) claims that social media is a practice of surveillance which pertains to sustained and targeted collection of people's aspects of everyday life, and which grants others' access to these data which are secured and kept private offline. Similarly, Andrejevic (2013) argues that surveillance has taken on new forms because of social media data mining; people's online practices are 'under surveillant scrutiny' and their personal information is routinely monitored and collected by the government and corporate entities. Thus surveillance of user data is an important part of platforms' operation (Fuchs, 2014). As Andrejevic and Gates (2014) observe in their discussion

of big data-driven surveillance, the infrastructure of platforms is built to facilitate surveillance practices.

The issues of social media mining can be more complex when banking and payment systems are embedded in digital platforms, as in the case of WeChat. This means that users' transactional and financial data can be captured by the platform and may be combined with the other data users disclosed on the platform and then shared across the digital spaces. Thus it is imperative to explore the potential implications of the data mining of a platform that comprehensively captures the data generated in everyday life. In this thesis, I prioritise users' experiences, exploring how people perceive WeChat's data mining and how their attitudes towards and understandings of WeChat's data mining shape how they manage their online practices. Doing so will contribute to the current debates on social media data mining from a bottom-up perspective.

2.3.6 Summary

Platforms are 'not neutral stages of self-performance' (van Dijck, 2013a, p.231) and have increasing power over users, 'making choices and connections in complex and unpredictable ways' (Beer, 2009, p.997). In this section, I have discussed four key approaches to platforms and four elements that characterise the workings of the platform, including affordances, interfaces, algorithms, and data mining. Given the work they do to mediate people's everyday practices has been identified as important, it is essential to explore their roles in enabling and constraining people's everyday use of WeChat. As such, the platform is the second element in my three-part model and the second research question of this thesis is: *how does the platform mediate what people do with WeChat?*

In an era of growing holistic mobile social media apps, most platform-based practices take place on mobile devices including smartphones and smartwatches. According to Light and others (2018), users typically access social media through mobile apps instead of websites. The experience of using social media platforms on mobile devices and whilst on the move is different from that of the user bound to a single point of access on the desktop (Hine, 2015). Therefore, what people do with social media cannot be fully understood without the

consideration of mobile devices. A significant part of users' practices is shaped by mobile devices, as discussed in the next section.

2.4 Mobile Devices: Mobility and Materiality

Mobile devices have increasingly become ubiquitous and personalised in individuals' everyday lives. This section discusses the third element in the three-part model and focuses on the importance of mobility and materiality of mobile devices in shaping people's practices in everyday life and in relation to digital media technologies.

2.4.1 The mobile dimension of mobile devices

Mobility and sociality

Mobile devices enhance sociality. It has been argued that the mobility of mobile devices creates a sense of intimate 'co-presence' (Ito and Okabe, 2005) or 'connected presence' (Licoppe, 2004), which enables the maintenance of personal and intimate relationships, overcoming limitations of location and time (Hjorth, 2012; Ling, 2008; Wang, 2008). Through mobile technologies, the flows of information and connections among social ties are woven into the moments of everyday life practices and movements, constituting 'perpetual contact' (Katz and Aakhus, 2002) and 'constant contact' (Ling, 2008). As such, mobile devices facilitate the frequency and flexibility of communication and enable people to stay in close contact with others on a daily basis (Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Wilken, 2011). This perspective highlights the importance of mobile devices in individuals' everyday lives which engenders great possibilities and convenience for connecting with social relations and managing personal networks. Thus there are continuities across the debates about mobile devices and social media discussed above.

Yet despite the connection, it is claimed that new responsibilities and duties are constantly allocated to individuals due to the 'always on' nature of mobile technologies (Turkle, 2008). For example, in *Work's Intimacy*, Gregg (2011) argues that digital technologies like mobile devices 'penetrate the walls that used to separate work from home' (p.2). This is the process she refers to as 'presence bleed', where 'tasks and demands can no longer be confined to specific workplace locations or scheduled hours', and the boundary between personal and

professional lives are blurred (Gregg, 2011, p.111). In other words, the purported convenience of the mobile technologies facilitates the workload and obscures the amount of additional work they demand, resulting in the inability to have a holiday without being accompanied by the office, for example. The above proposition highlights a never-ending schedule of tasks rendered through mobile technologies that must be fulfilled and may lead to constant self-representational and sharing practices in relation to mobile devices. Since WeChat is primarily experienced on mobile phones and increasingly embedded in individuals' everyday lives, this analysis seeks to explore how users engage with personal and professional connections on WeChat and whether and how they negotiate their mobile availability and accessibility.

Mobility and spatiality

Mobile devices shape how people conceptualise and experience place (digital and physical). The mobility of mobile devices incorporates remote contexts into the present context, enabling people to simultaneously situate themselves in both urban and digital spaces at the same time (Hjorth et al., 2012; Ito, 2003; Okabe, 2009). According to Farman (2012), mobile technologies seamlessly locate individuals in digital space and material space by dissolving 'experiences of virtual space into the practices of our everyday lives', making space and the device seemingly natural/transparent in mobile phone use (p.36). Yet such mobility can pose difficulties to individuals' self-representational practices, challenging Goffman's (1959) theory of 'actors' and 'performance' and his strict distinction between 'front stage' and 'backstage', discussed earlier in this chapter. The co-presence in two spaces at once can result in parallel and multiple front stages, and thus may lead to the conflict of role-playing (Geser, 2004) as actors need to continually juggle differing audiences from separate social stages (Fortunati, 2005; Ling and Yttri, 2002). As Turner and others (2008) suggest, 'the mobile phone call brings what is normatively regarded as a part of the backstage of social life into the front stage' (p.202). For example, when parents make 'remote parenting' calls with their children from the workplace, their conversations may be overheard by their colleagues which may complicate impression management at work. As a result, the mobility of mobile devices can be disruptive when self-representation from one stage breaches onto the other. Yet it is found that mobile device users actively adopt tactics to manage the situation and recover from the

disturbance. For example, finding their own space, lowering their voices, and keeping calls short are techniques to mitigate intrusion (Ling, 2004; Okabe and Ito, 2005; Plant, 2001).

Mobile devices are locative media because they are able to 'locate users in physical space and provide information about the device's surrounding space' via the satellite Global Positioning System (GPS) (Firth, 2017, p.537). Mobile applications that are reliant upon and utilize the possibilities brought by mobile technologies also offer precision for tracking locations and routes in real time (Frith, 2015; Lambert, 2013). Locative media shape people's digital practices and experience by navigating access to place-specific information. For example, mobile games like Pokémon Go navigate users' route and steer their exploration of immediate surroundings and collection of virtual objects (Licoppe, 2017; Richardson and Wilken, 2009). Location-based apps like Yelp use individuals' physical locations to offer spatially relevant results and the suggested results guide people to where to go and what to eat (Anderson and Magruder, 2012; Luca, 2011). Locative media also offer new ways for people to self-represent and share. For example, some people represent themselves via 'regular locational postings' without textual/pictorial information (Sutko and de Souza e Silva, 2011), whilst others put conscious thought into which places are worth sharing or check-in via smartphones (Frith, 2012). The ways in which users associate certain places with everyday self-representational and sharing practices on social media is what Schwartz and Halegoura (2015) call the 'spatial self'. They argue that people relate themselves with the values that are represented by the specific venue and tend to represent who they are through where they go (Schwartz and Halegoura, 2015). In other words, the disclosure of one's location which is attached with symbolic and performative meanings is constitutive of the identity construction of oneself. The above arguments highlight the importance of mobile devices as locative media in mediating how individuals organise and arrange their everyday practices with social media around places. As discussed in the introductory chapter, most WeChat services are mobile-driven and only rendered through mobile phones. Therefore it is important to consider how mobile devices shape users' everyday practices in relation to WeChat. This thesis thus discusses whether and how WeChat affords new practices around places.

Mobile devices work to construct a mobile individual, providing experiences on the move, and the study of mobile technologies is helpful for understanding people's everyday practices

and experiences in relation to mobile devices. Yet although the mobile device is a technology-oriented product, this does not result in technological determinism. There are other aspects of mobile devices that affect the process of individuals' everyday practices – materiality, for example, as will be illustrated in the following section.

2.4.2 The material dimension of mobile devices

The other dimension of mobile devices to be discussed is materiality. The focus on materiality moves us away from the functionalities of mobile technologies towards the 'objects that are intimately incorporated into routine bodily practices' (Beer, 2012, p.362). Materiality matters, because the 'meanings of things are inscribed in their forms, their uses, and their trajectories', so 'it is only through the analysis of these that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things' (Appadurai, 1988, p.5).

Objects create the conditions of everyday life. Highlighting the importance of different forms of material objects that surround people, Miller (2010) suggests that people are 'inculcated into the general habits and dispositions' of objects through how they interact with them in their everyday practices. Miller (2005) also points out that the power that objects develop over people not only physically lies in its ability to shape people's everyday encounters, but often precisely lies in its invisibility to the human eye. This is possibly because, as Miller (2005) states, 'much of what we are, exists not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us... the objects have managed to obscure their role and appear inconsequential'. This is what Miller refers to as the 'humility of things' (1987). Yet, the less we recognise the existence of objects, the more capacity they have to determine what takes place and manage our expectations through setting up scenes and regularising practices (Miller, 2005). In other words, there is a paradox between how invisible and yet how powerful everyday objects can be: objects succeed in achieving this 'humility' by receding into a background role, yet they determine our practices and adjust our lives. Considering digital media technologies as discrete objects, Kember and Zylińska (2012) also argue that, with the ubiquitous and widespread adoption of the technologies like mobile devices in everyday life, they are 'embedded and concealed within the objects and materials of everyday life' and simply taken for granted and naturalised into visibility (p.105). In other words, mobile devices

as objects fade out of our focus and remain peripheral to our vision yet they shape our everyday practices.

However, this is not always the case. Material objects are often implicated in different meanings by individuals and are seen as an extension of the self. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) propose that some material objects we use 'are not just tools we can pick up and discard at our convenience', they are 'repositories for the meaning people project on them' (p.11). For example, a teddy bear is not just a toy for children, it is something that signals safety when going to sleep; a wedding ring is not just a piece of jewellery but represents devotion and fidelity between two parties (Beck, 2014). In his study of people's choices of personal possessions, Berger (2009) argues that one of the factors that people take into consideration when purchasing objects is whether they can suggest their social status and class to others. This echoes Bourdieu's (1979) discussion of 'taste'. He forges a link between taste and objects by arguing that taste distinguishes the bourgeoisie and solidifies their cultural capital, which is concerned with the reproduction and maintenance of a stratified society. For example, he demonstrates how individuals of different backgrounds construct distinct eating styles by choosing, preparing and presenting foods (Bourdieu, 1979). Thus, material objects are seen as an extension of a performative act and a way through which people manage the display of their identities. According to Belk (1988), people 'learn, define, and remind themselves of who they are by their possessions' (p.160).

The significant roles of mobile devices as objects are pointed out by mobile phone scholars. They observe, for example, how a phone's decorations and accessories can be seen as a reflection of owners' personality and sense of style (Campbell, 2008; Licoppe, 2008) and how mobile phone models work to demonstrate the financial situation and 'trendiness' of the user (Pfaff, 2010; Wang, 2008). Thus, mobile phone personalisation contributes to the making of the self and the self is a reflection of the mobile phone a person owns (Hjorth, 2006). As such, mobile phones become an icon of 'me, my mobile and my identity' that embody people's everyday lives (Hulme and Truch, 2006) rather than just merely enabling them. These arguments show that the way we think about, value and use the mobile phones that surround us are not just informed by what they are, but how we see ourselves, what they signify, and what they represent to us. As such, it is difficult to distinguish between what is 'mine' and

what is 'me' as we feel and treat them in the same way (Afshar, 2014). This suggests that the meanings and significance of mobile objects depend on the diverse ways in which individuals engage with and relate to them, contradicting the idea of the 'humility' of the phone as an object in everyday life. Therefore, in this thesis I explore how users respond to and interact with mobile phones as objects and whether and how the self is projected and played out through the customisation of the inside and outside of mobile phones.

The attachment of objects is also shown in the research. Possession attachment is commonly understood as an association that people perceive between themselves and specific possessions of them that in some ways is similar to the relationship they may have with another person (Afshar, 2014). In their research, Timpano and Shaw (2013) found that people feel responsible for taking care of their possessions. For example, their participants reflected that their possessions may be 'lonely' without their company, or how they wanted things to go to a good place if they could no longer keep them. Similarly, McCracken (1987) states when a forced or unintended loss or separation from a favourite possession happens, people may react with an intense sorrow that is comparable to grieving and mourning and may result in stress, role change and loss of continuity with life. In her examination of the emotional and embodied relationship that users have with their computers, Lupton and Nobel (1997) contends that people anthropomorphise their possessions, such as patting them when they are slow to respond or giving them names. Thus an object can become a substitute for the presence of real others and anthropomorphism attributes human characteristics to non-human things (Lupton and Nobel, 1997).

The relationships that people have with their mobile devices are described as 'intimate' because people take mobile phones with them 'whenever they go, carry or wear them close to the body, and place nearby, even in sleep or repose' considering the compact sizes and connections afforded by mobile phones (Goggin, 2011, p. 152). Such physical proximity to and haptic interactions with the mobile devices enable an intimate feeling to be imbued in them by users (Hjorth and Kim, 2004; Vincent, 2005). A mobile phone is further considered to be an 'intimate object' in everyday life because they are increasingly assimilated by people as 'extensions of the body and mind' (Elliott and Urry, 2010; Vincent, 2014) and gradually come to be seen as an integral part of the self. As Lupton (2014) argues, mobile devices have

‘transmuted into smaller and more easily wearable and even ingestible forms, it becomes less obvious where the body ends and the technology begins’ (p.80). For my analysis, I will explore whether and how intimacy with mobile phones might relate in some way to intimacy with WeChat, given the mobile nature of WeChat. Yet despite that people are attached to their mobile phones, they may also be willing to ‘trade them in for newer models or replace them if they are lost’ (Beck, 2014). This suggests that people’s relationships with their mobile devices are complex and changeable. This opens up questions about whether users’ attachments to mobile phones relate to their materiality or result from immaterial things like the apps therein. This thesis will attempt to address such questions.

2.4.3 Summary

This section made clear that both the mobile and material dimensions of mobile devices have the potential to impact upon people’s practices in everyday life. It discussed how mobile technologies of mobile devices engender possibilities and convenience for everyday connections, and shape users’ experiences of digital and physical places and the way they organise their everyday practices with social media around places. This section also recognised materiality of mobile devices; whilst some scholars focus on how mobile devices – as objects that have faded into the background – shape people’s everyday encounters, others highlight how material objects are imbued with different meanings by individuals through their engagements and relationships with them. Thus the mobile device is considered to be an important element in mediating people’s everyday practices and forms the third element in my three-part model. The third research question is: *how do mobile devices mediate what people do in relation to WeChat?*

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has drawn together work from a range of digital media and sociological studies to present an overview of the research that speaks to each dimension of the analytical three-part model of this thesis, and which therefore shapes the thesis. Previous studies provide a spectrum of descriptions of what people do with social media, by focusing either on users’ perceptions, the mediation of platforms, or the mediation of mobile devices. However, it has been highlighted in this chapter that all three elements – user, platform, mobile device –

mediate people's practices in everyday life and in relation to social media in distinct and specific ways. As such, in this thesis, I argue that we need to move beyond a one-dimensional approach and bring together these three mediating elements by proposing a three-part model for understanding what people do with WeChat. As such, the overarching research question in this thesis is: *what is the role of the 'three-part model' (made up of user, platform and mobile phone) in mediating what people do with WeChat?*

It is clear that this thesis integrates three literatures for researching people's everyday practices in relation to WeChat that relate to: a) user self-representation and sharing; b) platform studies; and c) mobile and material studies, to provide a comprehensive understanding of people's everyday practices in relation to social media. This thesis will thus contribute by extending current theoretical understandings in each area and merging these different bodies of work, thus offering new insights and ideas.

This three-part framework will be applied to analyse the data collected for this study which will be presented in empirical Chapters 5 to 8 of this thesis. I will first introduce the digital landscape in China and the methodology employed this research before I move to the empirical discussion.

Chapter 3. Digital Landscape in China

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I reviewed and presented the literature from which I derived my three-part model (user, platform, and mobile device) – including self-representation and sharing, platforms and their characteristics, and the mobility and materiality of mobile objects – which form the foundations for how I seek to understand what people do with WeChat.

Before moving on to discuss the research questions and methods used in my research, I first provide an overview of WeChat and the context of the Chinese Internet. The chapter begins by introducing the digital platforms that dominate the Chinese Internet, including Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent (collectively known as BAT), Weibo, and TikTok. Extending the focus beyond the state-centric lens, this section aims to outline the digital context in which WeChat was fostered and continues to develop. The chapter then proceeds to detail what WeChat is and how it works, with key features and services summarised and visualised. It seeks to draw out the ‘infrastructulisation of WeChat’ (Plantin and de Seta, 2019) and capture the specific practices and experiences WeChat offers, which are discussed in later empirical chapters. The chapter ends by presenting my approach to researching WeChat.

3.2 Digital Landscape in China

China has made great strides in technology development and Internet industrial expansion in recent years. The number of people using the Internet in China reached 900 million as of March 2020, ranking first in the world, followed by India with 560 million Internet users and the US with 313 million, according to Internet World Stats (2020). According to the 45th statistical report by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), the Internet availability rate in 2020 was 63.4% and 99.3% of Internet users in China accessed the Internet via their mobile phones (CNNIC, 2020). This indicates the increasing adoption of mobile applications and that digital platforms are frequently accessed via mobile devices. The digital landscape in China primarily consists of five tech giants which can be compared with the Big Five – Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft – in Western societies. They are: Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent, also known as BAT, which have dominated search engines, e-

commerce, and social networking respectively; Sina Weibo, a micro-blogging platform which is equivalent to Twitter; and the up-and-coming ByteDance, owner of the trending short-video sharing platform TikTok.

Originally founded in 2000, Baidu is the biggest search engine in China and accounts for 70% of the search engine market, towering above other operators, including Sogou, Yahoo China and Microsoft's Bing (Chinese Internet Watch, 2020). Baidu has also grown beyond its basic functions, offering a wide range of Internet-related services and products, including music, maps, games, and videos, and operating across multiple domains, such as artificial intelligence and cloud computing.

Founded in 1999, Alibaba is the biggest online commerce company and most popular online shopping platform in China. According to a financial report from Alibaba group, its three main shopping sites, Taobao, Tmall and Alibaba.com, accounted for 62% of the Chinese ecommerce market and hosted 960 million annual active users globally by March 2020 (Alibaba, 2020). The 2019 annual gross merchandise volume (GMV) transacted on Alibaba's retail marketplaces in China totalled Rmb 5,727 billion (£633 billion), more than those of eBay (£9.97 billion) and Amazon.com (£37 billion) combined in the same year (Ma, 2020). Like Baidu, Alibaba also serves more advanced purposes than its core business. It gradually developed the built-in payment tool Alipay to an integrated service provider which supports mobile payment with smartphones, enables online transactions such as mortgage redemption and investment management, and incorporates messaging and social sharing functions into the platform.

In contrast to the dominant position of Baidu in domestic search engines and Alibaba in the e-commerce market, Tencent, WeChat's parent company, has devoted focus to the social sphere since 1998. Tencent started its business with QQ, an instant messaging service, which is equivalent to Skype and MSN. It later launched QQ mail, QQ music, Tencent games, and Qzone where users can write blogs, share content, and personalise their homepage and the typesetting of the blog. Tencent gradually integrated these features into QQ panel, meaning that they could all be accessed within a single platform. Despite the prevalence of WeChat, QQ remains a major social media platform among communities, with over 647 million

monthly active users in 2020. The rhetoric of building a comprehensive platform is a recurring theme in the development of Tencent. More discussion on this follows in the next section.

Sina Weibo, a micro-blogging platform, is one of the leading social media platforms in China, claiming 550 million monthly active users by 2020. Released in 2009, it is often referred to as the Chinese version of Twitter where users can create, discover and share content and follow other users, institutions, celebrities, government agencies and other public figures. It is also seen as a newsroom or an information centre which hosts large amounts of real time data about the latest topics and social issues. Drawing a distinction between its roles and WeChat, Weibo highlights the visibility and openness of the platform in its platform architecture. As the chairman of Sina Weibo Charles Chao claimed in the Sina Corporation Earnings Conference call in 2012⁷, 'Weibo is probably more public, with people sharing information publicly; whatever they say or publish can be seen by everybody, but WeChat is more private, people sharing information content among friends, and people know each other'. In contrast to WeChat, Weibo is a public network where user profiles and shared posts are visible to a wider audience. Partnering up with third parties, Weibo diversifies its products by offering live-streaming and gaming services and integrating Weibo Wallet into the platform where users can make online payments and access an array of transactional services, such as investing in stocks and shares, shopping online, and purchasing health insurance.

Despite BAT and Weibo dominating most key sectors in the Chinese digital landscape, TikTok, developed by ByteDance in 2018, shows signs that it is dominating today's social media. TikTok, also known as Douyin, is a short-video sharing platform with 600 million daily active users in China. The app allows users to create 15-second videos and add filters, effects and music clips to these videos. The homepage of TikTok displays an algorithmic feed based on the videos users have interacted and engaged with. It is similar to a Twitter centred around viral tweets and trending topics, or an Instagram entirely built around its 'Explore' tab. In other words, the streams and content that users encounter on TikTok are curated and customised by TikTok algorithms rather than being selected and directed by the user. As the campaign slogan reflected in its parent company ByteDance's website notes: 'content

7. See <http://ir.sina.com/events/event-details/q4-2012-sina-corporation-earnings-conference-call> [in Chinese]

platforms enable people to enjoy content powered by AI technology'. Moreover, TikTok also serves as a live-streaming platform where users can interact with their followers in real time, as well as an ecommerce platform which allows content creators to feature their products in the videos and enables users to make purchases through these promotional clips. For example, brands can set up their channels and include a 'shop now' button to direct users to their shopping sites. Tourist attractions can share promotional videos on their TikTok accounts where users can tap for location and ticket information.

There is a clear tendency for the dominant digital platforms in China to develop beyond their basic functions and merge new elements into their platform architectures. They attempt to integrate add-on features to address users' daily needs and diverging interests, rather than just specialising in offering specific services. This is the larger environments within which WeChat exist and operate. According to van Dijck (2013a), the expansion of specific platforms into other realms is part of their efforts to dominate their fields. She points out that platforms experiment across four classifications: social networking sites, user-generated content (UGC) sites, commerce and trading sites, and game sites. Yet, 'there are no sharp boundaries between various platform categories' because it is common for platforms to start out in one particular domain and progressively 'encroach upon other territories while trying to contain users inside their own fenced-off turf' (van Dijck, 2013a, p.8-9). This is also happening with Western platforms, for example, Facebook – whose primary focus is to promote social networking – also encourages people to share content like UGC platforms, as well as experimenting in both marketing and gaming.

It is widely acknowledged that state regulation is a built-in component of the Chinese Internet, which has shaped the current digital landscape in China and the environment and norms within which social media operate. The implications and consequences of Internet governance by the state have been widely discussed by researchers across the globe (e.g. Harwit and Clark, 2001; Jiang, 2012; Yang and Mueller, 2014) and by Western media (e.g. The Economist, 2016; The Guardian, 2018; The New York Times, 2019). However, I did not include the role of the Chinese state in my analysis in this thesis for two main reasons. First and foremost, I think that research into the place of the Chinese Internet in everyday life should move beyond a focus primarily on the Chinese state. It is important to note that I am not

saying the role of the state in Chinese digital platforms is unimportant. Rather, I am suggesting that the state-centred approach may obscure other emerging central issues in the social media landscape in China, for example, the ‘infrastructuralisation of platform’. This term refers to the convergence of platform and infrastructure as a result of the embeddedness and expansion of platform-based services in society, which significantly influences the place of social media platforms in people’s everyday lives yet has received less attention and focus in academic research. I will say more about this issue in Section 3.3.5. Second, given the authoritarian nature of the regime, it might have been difficult to facilitate my participants to engage in conversations about the government’s Internet regulatory policies and practices. Thus analysing state regulation in my research would not have been a very productive focus.

3.3 Development of WeChat

Primarily operating on mobile devices, WeChat initially described itself as an instant messaging app on the App Store⁸ in 2011, which aimed to bring down the telecommunication barriers that stood amid regular communication. WeChat has then gradually transformed into an all-inclusive app which supports most of the basic necessities of modern daily life, from social sharing to mobile payment, from hailing a ride to booking a flight, from scheduling a doctor’s appointment to ordering housekeeping services. A new slogan, ‘WeChat is a lifestyle’, has featured in its design⁹ since 2016. There are a number of significant functions that are essential for the development of WeChat into a mega-platform – this section will outline and visualise the definitive features¹⁰ of WeChat that are widely used and frequently mentioned by research participants, including messaging, Moments, WeChat Pay and QR code, Official Accounts and Mini-programmes.

3.3.1 Instant messaging

Instant messaging is the core of WeChat. Like WhatsApp, its main interface shows a list of conversations that users are engaged in. Comments throughout the interviews that I carried out for this research reflected that WeChat was mainly used for personal and professional

8. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20110124212238/http://itunes.apple.com:80/us/app/id414478124?mt=8%26ls=1>

9. <https://web.archive.org/web/20160924084134/http://weixin.qq.com/>

10. The visual illustrations are screenshots taken from WeChat English language version.

connections and small group discussions. There are several ways for individuals to connect with each other on WeChat, such as sending and receiving text/voice messages, photos, videos, and memes, making video/voice calls, and sharing files, locations and name cards (Figure 3.1).

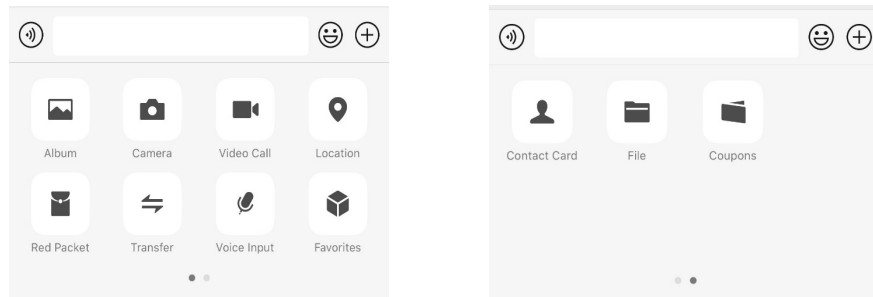


Figure 3.1 An illustration of different options that WeChat provides for connecting users

As the above figure shows, WeChat also enables users to give digital cash to their contacts through Red Packets and Transfer functions. Traditionally, a red packet is a red envelope stuffed with cash, presented and given as a gift during special occasions in China, such as weddings and Lunar New Year. Gifting money in red envelopes in Chinese society symbolizes showing appreciation to one another, typically by the elder generations to younger relatives. Within the context of WeChat, anyone can issue a Red Packet to others, up to 200 yuan (£20),

in a one-to-one chat, or in a group, where the sender can specify the number of people who can receive it and the amount of money that is put inside, which can be randomly divided into a number of small Red Packets for group members (as shown in Figure 3.2).

People are also able to transfer money to individuals through the Transfer function. According to the majority of my research participants, this mechanism is often chosen in preference to Red Packets for amounts over 200 yuan (£20) due to the limit of Red Packets (Figure 3.3). More discussion about individuals' practices in relation to WeChat Red Packets and Transfer functions will follow later in the thesis. Although WeChat money-exchanging services are situated in the chat function, they are a part of the WeChat payment feature. This is because individuals are required to link their bank accounts with WeChat accounts to engage in the economic practices on the app, and the money collected from Red Packets and money Transfer functions is automatically added to a person's WeChat wallet, which can be used for future mobile payments. I say more about WeChat Pay in section 3.3.3.

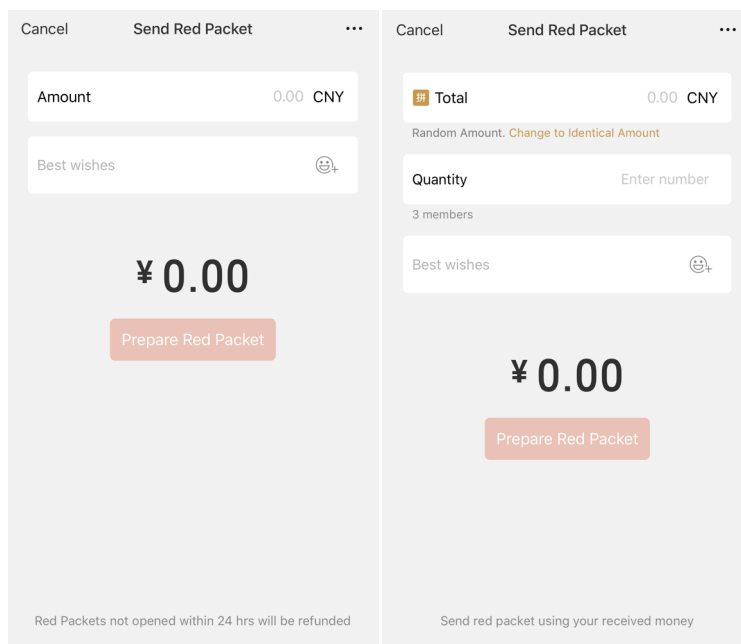


Figure 3.2 The interface for issuing a Red Packet in an individual chat and a group

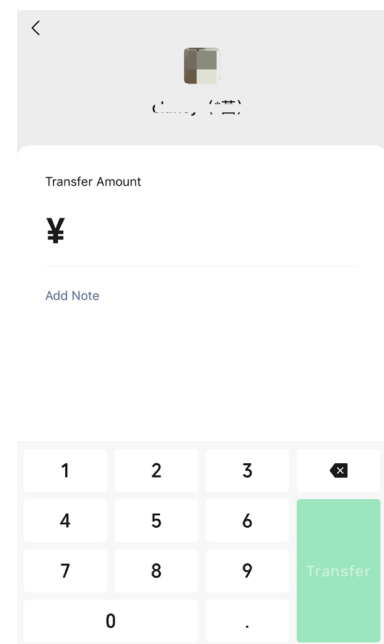


Figure 3.3 The interface for transferring money to specific WeChat contacts

3.3.2 Moments

Moments – also known as friend circle – is a fundamental function of WeChat launched in 2012. It shares similar features with Facebook news feeds and Twitter timeline, which enables users to share, post, comment and ‘like’ (Figure 3.4). In contrast to other social sharing platforms, WeChat offers a relatively high level of intimacy and privacy by default. For example, users’ posts are only visible to individuals in their WeChat contacts; comments and ‘likes’ of Moments posts are not available to all who have access to the posts, meaning that only mutual friends from the author’s WeChat friends are able to view these interactions on the posts; only links can be reposted in Moments and thus users are not allowed to share other users’ posts. Users are also able to edit their privacy settings to manage who can access their Moments, and for how long (Figure 3.5).

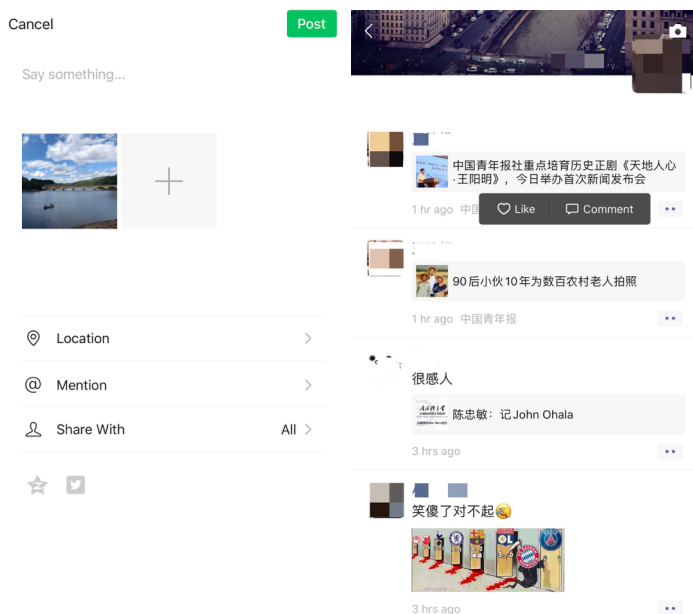


Figure 3.4 The Moments interface

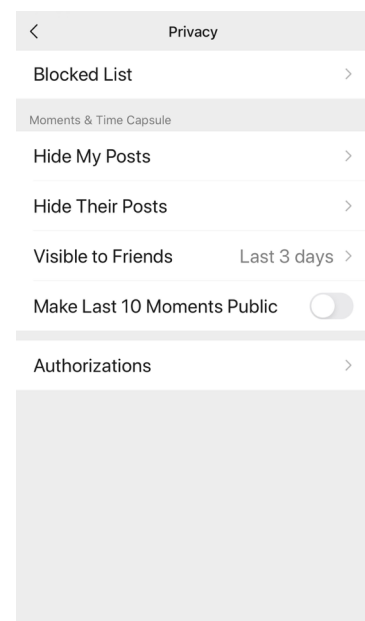


Figure 3.5 An Illustration of WeChat's privacy settings

In 2015, WeChat started to incorporate advertising into Moments and to allow brands and companies to place sponsored content in users’ news feeds. Moments ads appear in users’ friend circle as feeds posted by their WeChat friends, consisting of text, images or videos, in a URL with an additional ‘sponsored’ tag in the upper right corner. Interested users can click on ‘Learn More’, displayed beneath the ad’s text or images, for more details. Users can also

turn off the ad by clicking on 'Not Interested' to prevent this ad as well as similar WeChat Moments ad from reappearing in the friend circle (Figure 3.6). These interactions with ads are one of the elements that WeChat uses to target specific audiences, according to the WeChat Ads page¹¹ which provides guidelines and solutions to online advertising on WeChat for businesses. The other criteria used for Moments ad targeting include: users' profiles, such as age, gender, and their locations in China¹², mobile phone system (such as iOS and Android), and type of network (e.g. Wi-Fi, 4G, 3G,2G).



Figure 3.6 An illustration of a Moments ad from Gree Electric, one of biggest appliance manufacturers in China

Moments ads are worth mentioning because WeChat has exercised careful control over advertising loads. For example, Moments was an ad-free place for four years, meaning that Moments remained a close social network for connections between individuals until 2015. WeChat also limited the number of advertising messages shown in a user's WeChat Moments feed to one per day. The automated in-feed Moments ads disappear within 6 hours if the user does not interact with them. Users will see up to one ad every 48 hours. As Poshu Yeung, the

11. <https://ad.weixin.qq.com> [in Chinese]

12. WeChat Moments ads are only available to people residing in Mainland China and cannot be served to overseas users.

vice president of WeChat's international business, announced in a press release in 2018¹³, 'We're trying to preserve the user experience. We could dive in and make a lot more money, showing five ads per day and likely making five times more revenue, but that's not what we want to do. We're going to take this slowly'. This is indicative of WeChat's less aggressive intention of monetisation in terms of sharing user-generated content to advertisers and third-party developers, and selling screen space for advertising and product promotion, compared to Western social media platforms such as Facebook. To illustrate, while 98% of Facebook's total revenue came from online advertising in 2016, advertising made up just 18% of WeChat's total revenue in the same fiscal year (Cantale and Buche, 2018). One interpretation of this difference is that monetisation is not the priority of WeChat's development at this stage. According to Chan (2015), differing from other platforms' business model of data driven content, WeChat 'cares more about how relevant and central WeChat is in addressing the daily, even hourly needs of its users'. This relates to the infrastructural strategy of the platform which will be discussed in section 3.3.4.

3.3.3 WeChat Pay

WeChat Pay, also known as WeChat wallet, is one of the most used payment methods in China nowadays. Together with Alipay, a mobile payment platform founded by Alibaba, these two apps took up 93.3% of the total mobile payment transaction volume – Rmb 347.11 trillion (£38.60 trillion) – in 2019, according to a report from the People's Bank of China (PBOC, 2020). As a built-in payment feature, WeChat Pay allows users to complete transactions directly through their mobile phones online and offline. It is claimed in Tencent's 2019 Annual Results that 900 million WeChat users make payments through WeChat Pay on a monthly basis and the average daily payment transaction volume exceeded 1 billion in 2019 (Tencent, 2019).¹⁴ A total of 72 million merchants were registered with the payment app by the end of 2019, 50 million of which were active (Tencent, 2019). Additionally, WeChat Pay's reach extends beyond national borders, being accepted by merchants in 25 countries, including the UK. Paying with WeChat in the UK was also raised by some participants during this research.

13. See <https://www.imd.org/research-knowledge/articles/whats-stopping-tencent-from-monetizing-wechat-in-the-most-obvious-way/>

14. This is the latest figure for WeChat Pay at time of writing.

Users are connected to an array of services through WeChat wallet (Figure 3.7), which are either offered directly by WeChat, such as repaying debts, paying water and electricity bills, and topping up mobile phones, or by third-party service providers, including purchasing a train or flight ticket, hailing a ride, and booking a hotel. WeChat Pay becomes a one-stop system which enables users to get services and make payments without leaving WeChat. Individuals will be redirected to the Mini-programmes when accessing services provided by the third parties, which will be the focus of the next section.

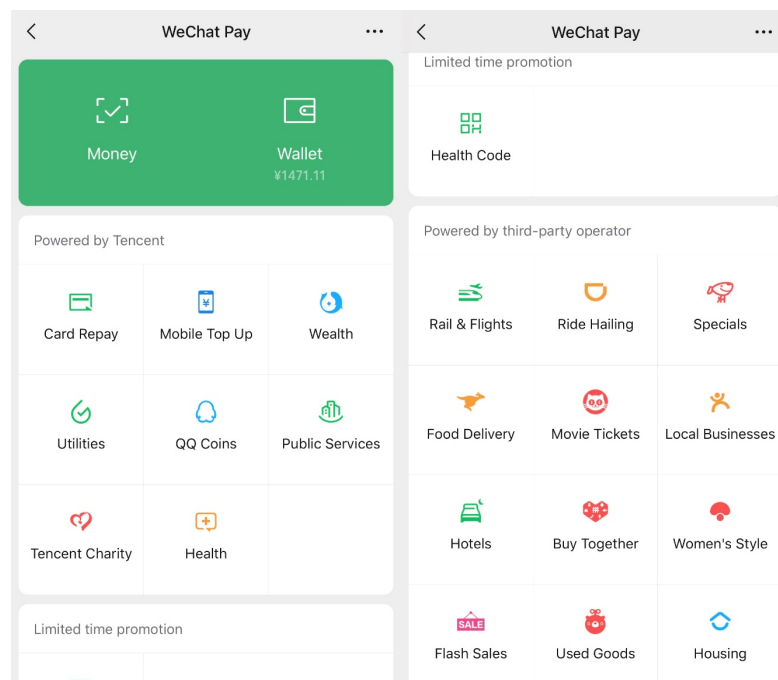


Figure 3.7 An image of the interface of WeChat wallet

WeChat Pay is also used for offline payments. According to the responses from my research participants and my own observations when doing fieldwork in China, WeChat Pay has become ubiquitous in everyday life in China. It is made visible through prominently displayed signage in shops, restaurants, supermarkets, convenience stores, and public transport, confirming the widespread acceptance of WeChat Pay. It is also observed that homeless people and street artists in cities are presenting WeChat Pay's QR codes to collect handouts and receive donations instead of receiving notes and coins. It seems clear to citizens in terms of what constitutes an appropriate situation for using WeChat Pay. Scanning QR codes through mobile phones was raised as a default option for many of the participants in this research to make offline payments. By clicking the 'Money' button (as shown in Figure 3.7), a

unique personal payment QR code¹⁵ is generated. With the mobile phone camera and a built-in QR code reader in WeChat, users can make payments by showing the generated payment QR code at the counter, which can be scanned by a specially-designed barcode-reading machine in stores (Figure 3.8), or by scanning the transaction QR code presented and displayed by retailers and inputting the set amount with WeChat Pay (Figure 3.9). A digital receipt is sent to users when completing a transaction and transaction details are recorded and available to check in the WeChat wallet. Transaction details are also recorded and available to check in the WeChat wallet.



Figure 3.8 A photo illustration of a WeChat user showing payment QR code to the cashier for the vendor to scan on a mobile phone. (Source: <https://medium.com/shanghaiist/you-can-now-tie-foreign-credit-cards-to-your-wechat-pay-account-f8d282fc2c2>, accessed: 25 January 2018)



Figure 3.9 A photo illustration of a WeChat user scanning the QR code displayed by the vendor to make payments on a mobile phone. Source: <https://www.finews.asia/finance/30138-foreigners-can-now-use-alipay-and-wechat-pay>, accessed: 7 November 2019

QR codes transmit data about monetary transactions and seamlessly bridge the physical context and online connections. WeChat links multiple actors of practice across space and time into a coherent practice of scanning. Such QR code scanning practices are oriented by the platform and supported by the mobile phone's built-in camera. Further discussion of the role that these features play in everyday practices will be explored later in this thesis.

15. According to WeChat (2020), the payment QR code expires after each use and 'is constantly changing to enhance the level of security. Users need to set up a passcode or use biometric information, such as the fingerprint and facial recognition function on their smartphones, to verify their identities before initiating payments'.

3.3.4 Official Account and Mini-programme

Apart from WeChat Pay, WeChat Official Account and Mini-programme are the other two ways of connecting individuals to services. Sharing similar characteristics of blogs and Facebook pages, WeChat Official Accounts – launched in 2012 – are public profile pages where third parties (individuals, organisations, institutions, and companies) can create and run their own services on WeChat. Individual users can follow their interested account and read and comment on the published posts. The followed subscription accounts are grouped together and archived in a dedicated folder appearing alongside users' friends in the 'chat' section of WeChat. The folder is brought to the top when there are new push notifications (Figure 3.10). The owners of these accounts can post articles, send messages, and interact with subscribers. They are also able to develop their own services through WeChat's APIs and integrate their websites with WeChat's functionalities. For example, Tesla's official account features functions of locating charging stations, scheduling a test drive and comparing specifications, features, fuel, performance of different models, while China Airline's WeChat account allows its subscribers to book a flight, make payments, and check in.

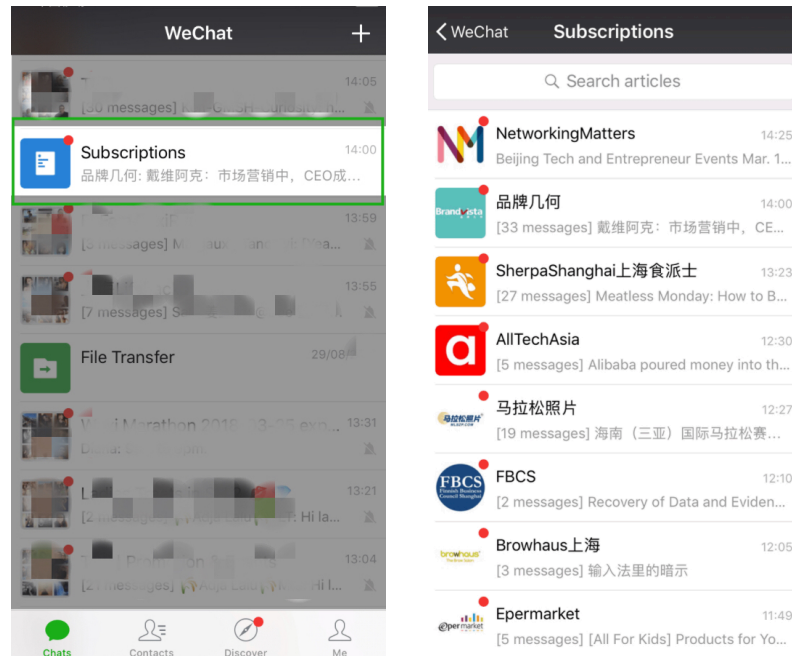


Figure 3.10 The interface for a list of WeChat Official Accounts

However, with the introduction of WeChat Mini-programmes in 2017, Official Accounts have gradually become a channel for contacting account owners and acquiring news and interested

information. This is because the subscribers of an Official Account, such as Tesla, are redirected to the company's Mini-programme on WeChat when accessing its services (Figure 3.11), rather than within Tesla's official websites. WeChat Mini-programmes are light versions of apps (of minimal size at 1 Mb) which function as independent apps but run inside WeChat (Figure 3.12). This mechanism enables people to access other digital platforms within the context of WeChat, without downloading and installing the apps from the Apple store or Google Play through their mobile phones. Mini-programmes can be found and accessed through companies' Official Accounts, scanning offline QR codes, searching within WeChat, and sharing from individual contacts or group chats. At the 2020 WeChat Open Class Pro event in Guangzhou on 9 January, Allan Zhang, the founder and CEO of WeChat, claimed that WeChat Mini-programmes recorded over 300 million daily active users in 2019 and the number of Mini-programmes available through WeChat totalled 2.36 million¹⁶. The number bypasses the size of Apple's App Store, which recorded 2.2 million apps in 2019 (Dogtiev, 2020). Operating on mobile devices, the platform has the potential to displace the mobile applications as the ground or interface upon which the mobile phone experience is built.



Figure 3.11 An illustration of Tesla's Mini-programme

16. See <https://v.qq.com/x/search/2020&stag=9> [in Chinese]

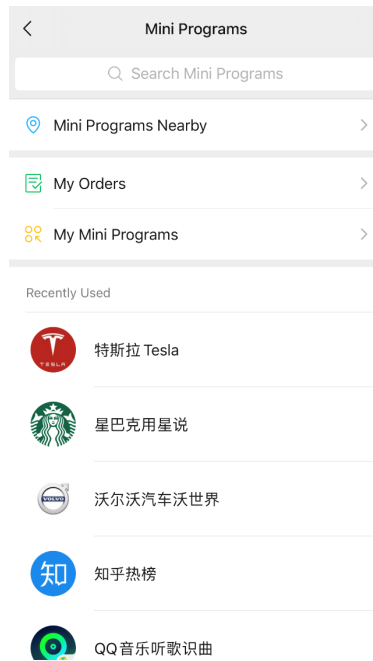


Figure 3.12 An illustration of a list of Mini-programmes saved and used by an individual user

WeChat expands into new sectors by orienting its programmability towards developers and businesses, and enabling external partners to build their services on the platforms through the Official Account. It then enhances the integration of services into the platform by offering a set of application programming interfaces (APIs) and software development kits (SDKs) that allow third parties to build and run their own apps within WeChat through Mini-programmes. As Chen and others (2018) suggest, 'if Official Accounts breaks the ground for WeChat to amplify services and communication for third-parties, Mini-programmes opens the window for WeChat to become an app-within-app platform' (p.88). Rather than stand-alone platforms, WeChat Mini-programmes are what Tiwana (2014) conceptualizes as 'nested platforms'. As such, these Mini-programmes are written in WeChat's proprietary coding languages and comply with platform guidelines and rules, and can only exist and operate within the context of WeChat. According to Plantin and de Seta, (2019), Mini-programmes allow third-party developers to build applications on top of WeChat while 'confining them to the WeChat environment' (p.261). This means that WeChat maintains control over the operation of these Mini-programmes as well as the data that are accessed and generated by these Mini-programmes. I describe the way that WeChat enacts its programmability and interconnects with other digital platforms and mobile applications as WeChat-ification. Such WeChat-

ification entails the extension of WeChat into the external digital spaces and its power to make external platforms' or apps' data either become part of WeChat or become WeChat-ready. I talk more about WeChat and its ecosystem of connectivity in Chapter 8.

It is important to note that WeChat was updated 21 times (from version 6.53 to 7.00) during the time of my fieldwork from March to December 2018. Minor differences were shown in its design and interfaces while the general features and services remained the same. WeChat's services updates up to the time this thesis was written will be discussed to help understand the workings of WeChat and capture the experience it offers in later chapters. However, WeChat is loaded with features and continues to expand. In a field where digital platforms change over time, some of the WeChat features I discuss may have faded into irrelevance and others may have emerged as major services in the use of WeChat.

3.3.5 Infrastructuralisation of WeChat

The comprehensiveness and embeddedness of WeChat in individuals' everyday lives makes it a foundational touchstone for Chinese citizens. This speaks to what scholars suggest as the 'infrastructuralisation of platform' (Helmond et al., 2019; Plantin, et al., 2018), which captures how the expansion of platform-based services acquire characteristics of infrastructure, such as scale, ubiquity, and criticality. As I have noted before, Chinese social media platform WeChat has become a global phenomenon, branching into diverse regions such as Southeast Asia, Europe, North America, and South Africa. The increasing numbers of active users across different places of the world claimed by WeChat, echoed by its business reports, demonstrate its noticeable presence among a large population. WeChat has also been used in a wide range of spheres through its integrated services, such as monetary transactions, public transport, as well as other cultural and social fields. The massive usage base and the plethora of services offered enable WeChat to achieve its scale and ubiquity of infrastructure. The embeddedness of WeChat in different aspects of society indicates its critical and essential role in the fabric of people's everyday lives. Indeed, a significant number of participants in this research showed their great reliance on WeChat's provision of services. Some also explicitly pointed out that they would find their lives substantially disrupted if WeChat broke down and opting out of WeChat came at a very high cost and was considered to be nearly impossible. Therefore,

WeChat, as a mega-platform, has gradually attained and exhibited properties that are usually associated with infrastructure.

The infrastructural intention of WeChat has always been the significant theme of the development of the platform. The rhetoric of building a digital living system is a recurring strategy theme in Tencent's official documents. Tencent CEO Tony Ma set out the industrial vision of Tencent earlier in 2010 in an interview with *People's Daily*, the largest newspaper group in China, claiming that Tencent 'wants to become as fundamental to Chinese Internet as electricity and water to our everyday life'.¹⁷ This aim was also stated in the biography *Tencent Ten Years*, 'we want to become the utilities on the Internet, offering one-stop Internet service solutions that cover the whole value chain' (Tencent Ten Years Writing Group, 2008, p.113–114). To achieve its infrastructural intention, Tencent highlights its capability of connection on its official websites and positions itself as the 'connector of the Internet', as Tony Ma noted at the 2014 World Internet Conference.¹⁸ Mark Ren, the COO of Tencent, publicly underlined the company's ideal at the 2014 Global Mobile Internet Conference. He further explained the plan by saying:

We are essentially a 'connected company' which links together not only people, but also people to services and products. We plan to cover much more ground in online-to-offline services than what we are doing now.

With its intention of 'connecting everything', WeChat positions itself in terms of its billions of end-users as well as the companies with which it has partnered and plans to partner. Doing so allows WeChat to aggregate users and organisations within the platform and enable seamless interactions and transactions among them. As underlined in Tencent's annual report, WeChat's 'strategic focus in this business is strengthening connections between users via digital content and services, as well as enhancing connections with enterprises leveraging Mini Programs and WeChat Pay' (Tencent, 2019, p.5). As I discussed in section 3.3.2, rather than being 'a commerce or even advertising platform' that profits from data-driven content,

17. See <https://edu.qq.com/a/20101223/000148.htm> [in Chinese]

18. See <https://cloud.tencent.com/developer/article/1065606> [in Chinese]

WeChat intends to become a 'smart living' system embedded in everyday life, as Poshu Yeung proclaimed in an interview early in 2014.¹⁹ WeChat continually establishes connections with external business and developers and integrates other apps and functions of the web into the platform, reconfiguring the platform as the hub of (digital) life. Doing this enables WeChat to reach its goal to address nearly every aspect of its users' day-to-day lives, as well as to expand its territory while trying to contain both users and other platforms inside 'their own fenced-off turf' (van Dijck, 2013a). This thus facilitates the development of WeChat-ification and the rise of WeChat's infrastructural presence and power in everyday life.

3.4 Conclusion: My Approach to Researching WeChat

With the development of WeChat, a growing number of researchers have examined people's practices in relation to the app. Some scholars explore users' motivations behind their WeChat usage, arguing that what people do with WeChat is driven by their desire for self-representation and sharing (Gan and Wang, 2015; Wang et al., 2015; Tong, 2014) and their need for socialisation and networking (Hou et al., 2017; Lisha et al., 2017; Feng, 2014). Some scholars focus on the specific features of WeChat and the impact they have on individuals, such as Moments and social sharing (Dai, 2016; Gan, 2017; Nie et al., 2018), Red Packets and gifting (Xu and Song, 2014; Feng, 2014; Wang and Wang, 2016), and WeChat Pay and cashless society (Wang and Gu, 2017; Xu, 2017). Other scholars pay attention to the design and development of WeChat. For example, Chen and others (2018) investigate the 'superstickiness' of WeChat, arguing that the design of WeChat stimulates and enhances addictive behaviours and keeps users glued to the platform whenever they use their smartphones. Plantin and De Seta (2019) explore the 'infrastructuralisation of WeChat', providing a new way for understanding WeChat and the composition and configuration of WeChat-related practices. Such infrastructuralisation results in WeChat's thorough embeddedness in everyday life, which will affect what people do with WeChat, the focus of this research.

10. See <https://thenextweb.com/apps/2014/04/11/wechat-isnt-planning-to-make-money-outside-of-china-yet-sees-us-as-hardest-market-to-crack/>

As I outlined in Chapter 2, researchers generally focus on what people do with social media either through users' perceptions, the mediation of platforms, or the mediation of mobile devices. Arguing that these three elements – user, platform, and mobile phone – all matter in terms of individuals' everyday practices with social media, I propose that we need to move beyond a one-dimensional approach. To fully understand what people do with social media apps like WeChat, I mobilise these different mediating elements and propose a three-part framework for studying what people do with WeChat, which incorporates users' self-representation and sharing practices, the platform and its characteristics, and mobile devices as mobile technologies and material objects.

Chapter 4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an explanation of the methodology and how the research was carried out. It will begin by outlining the formulation of research questions and the rationale for the chosen methods for the empirical study. It will then proceed to detail the qualitative approaches I took in this research, including ethnographic interviews that drew upon narrative and observational materials, diary-keeping, and document analysis. The resultant sample, the ethical issues that informed and limited the research design and fieldwork, and the data collection and analysis processes will be presented in the discussion of the qualitative methods employed. Reflections on my position as a researcher are included in this chapter. Finally, the chapter ends with a note on the process of translating the Chinese language data into English.

4.2 Research Aim and Questions

As outlined in the literature review, existing studies provide a spectrum of discussions about what people do with social media, focusing either on users' perceptions, the mediation of platforms, or the mediation of mobile devices. However, I argue that all three elements – user, platform, and mobile phone – matter in terms of shaping what people do with social media, as I have outlined in the literature review. As such, I argue that we should move beyond a focus on just one dimension and bring these dimensions together in order to generate comprehensive understanding of people's everyday practices in relation to the social media platform on which my research is focused, WeChat. Therefore, the core aim of this research is to explore the role of the 'three-part model' (made up of user, platform and mobile phone) in mediating what people do with WeChat. To meet this aim, my three research questions are:

1. What do people do and how do people understand what they do with WeChat?
2. How does the platform mediate what people do with WeChat?
3. How do mobile devices mediate what people do in relation to WeChat?

4.3 Rationale for the Methodology

Since the research seeks to address the 'what' and 'how' of individuals' everyday practices in relation to WeChat, I considered it necessary to adopt a methodology that can procure the appropriate level of depth and enable the understanding of personal experience within the everyday context. Therefore, qualitative methodologies which facilitate the 'richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity' of the understandings of the social world (Mason, 2002, p.1) were deemed to be suitable for this research. The exploration of the mediation of the different elements of the three-part model in users' everyday practices with WeChat makes it necessary to employ a combined approach that gathers different data sources. Three methods were thus selected to complement each another in addressing the research aim: a) ethnographic interviewing; with b) diary keeping; and c) document analysis.

Ethnographic interviewing provided me with descriptive accounts of users' engagements with WeChat and observations of their interactions and relationships with the platform and mobile devices in real time. The diary-keeping method was chosen to obtain the records of participants' WeChat practices and experiences in everyday settings. They aided the understanding of users' perceptions of their WeChat practices as well as their perspectives on the mediation of the platform and mobile phone in their everyday engagements with WeChat. They also helped me to identify specific issues and problems to follow up or investigate more deeply in the document analysis. I considered document analysis an appropriate method for providing information about what WeChat does and how it works (on/with mobile devices) from the perspective of the platform. This approach helped further understand the mediation of the platform (and mobile phone) in everyday life and accounts for certain issues that were mentioned, questioned and/or remained unresolved in the ethnographic interviews, such as confusion about the workings of the WeChat algorithms in the allocation of Red Packets and concerns about the accuracy and relevance of the personalised advertising messages in WeChat Moments. These combined methods can provide a 'more holistic approach to measurement, analysis and interpretation' (Lobe et al., 2007, p.14) of the mediation of the three-part model and to my research questions, that might otherwise not be possible with a single method. In what follows, I provide a specific rationale for using these methods.

4.3.1 Ethnographic interviews

All 41 participants in this research who I introduce in detail below (see Appendix 1) engaged in ethnographic interviewing, which incorporated standard semi-structured interviews enhanced with observation. The semi-structured interviewing technique was selected for its capacity to construct an in-depth narrative between the participants and researchers, giving flexibility and freedom to both parties to pursue certain topics and questions (Kvale, 1996; Bryman, 2012). It allows the researcher to conduct interviews in a similar way to a conversation and to construct a naturalistic context where respondents may feel less inhibited about sharing than they would in other settings (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). While researchers can prepare necessary topic areas for guidance and respond to information generated in the interview, participants can reflect on their own perceptions and experiences and raise issues that matter to them (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Mason, 2014). Thus I investigated participants' perceptions and practices of WeChat by listening to them talk about their experiences and usage as they saw them.

Semi-structured interviewing draws upon verbal narrative and articulation. However, other dimensions of people's everyday experience such as the material, embodied, spatial, visual and sensory, are missing. These non-verbal dimensions of interviews are worthy of investigation because not all knowledge is reducible to language (Eisner, 2008) and some experiences and feelings may be difficult to verbalise (Bagnoli, 2009; Croghan et al., 2008). For example, the habitual, taken-for-granted nature of the way people engage with WeChat makes it difficult for people to recall and reflect upon in a standard qualitative interview. As a result, I employed visual and creative methods in my interviewing to facilitate investigating layers of experience that may remain unspoken and not easily expressed in words (Gauntlett, 2007). This approach is also known as ethnographic interviewing, which refers to the incorporation of ethnographic elements into a standard interview, such as observation of the environment, the use of visual materials, exploration of the sensory elements of the interview interactions, and working with interviewees on producing things within the interview (Bagnoli, 2009; Mason, 2010; Mason and Davies, 2009). For example, in their investigation of the social significance of family resemblances in everyday life, Mason and Davies (2009) used photographs as elicitation and observed elements of the sensory in participants' discussion about the construction and negotiation of physical (and other) resemblances. They propose

that these ethnographic elements as a part of the interview help generate a holistic understanding of people's 'tangible and intangible experience of resemblance' (Mason and Davies, 2009, p.590). Similarly, Hurdley (2006) observed participants' house possessions and used the displayed objects as elicitation to explore the meaning of things in their home. She found that ethnographic techniques can provide clues as to the lived experience of participants and facilitate the recounting of stories of home decorations, and thus can offer an interpretive understanding of the 'personal, interactive and ongoing aspects of domestic life and the accomplishment of material cultures as everyday practice' (Hurdley, 2006, p.730).

Therefore, bringing ethnographic elements to the interview offers ways through which to investigate participants' practices as they unfold and perform and as they are reported and demonstrated. As a part of the interviewing process, I decided to ask participants to show me around their mobile phones and share how they behaved on the platform so I could use these to encourage participants to reflect upon their particular experiences and practices in relation to WeChat. I also observed the way users express their perceptions, their embodied interactions with mobile devices during the interview, and their engagements with the platform. This process aided the disclosure of how their relationships with the platform and their mobile devices mediated their WeChat practices. More details about the ethnographic elements included in the interviews will be presented later in this chapter. Observation of participants' connections with others raises ethical issues which I discuss below.

Moreover, the ethnographic interviewing method enabled me to understand the continuities and discontinuities between what participants say about what they do and what they actually do with WeChat. For example, one of the participants considered himself as a non-WeChat person yet he found that WeChat was his most used app in the last 24 hours when we checked his Battery Usage in his iPhone settings together during the interview (more discussion on this will follow in Chapter 5). Thus, observing users as they described their WeChat-related practices could bring important details of their everyday practices to light.

4.3.2 Diaries

I asked my research participants to construct a diary of their engagements with WeChat for one day before the interview. I considered this method suitable in my research for two main reasons. First, diary-keeping can provide a window onto individuals' everyday lives. As I noted in Chapter 2, digital media technologies have faded into the background and are taken for granted as they have become mundane and unremarkable components of the everyday. Thus it may be difficult for a researcher to get participants talking explicitly about their daily routines with digital technologies (Hine, 2015). The very nature of WeChat and the 'humility' (Miller, 2005) of the mobile phones which support the workings of the platform mean that participants may not notice themselves using WeChat. It can be tricky for participants to provide retrospective verbalised accounts and recall their habitual use of WeChat. The diary-keeping method was thus selected in this research for its ability to reveal people's daily rituals and routines (Elliott, 1997) and to document the minutiae of everyday events that it might not be possible to reflect in other forms of data collection (Scoot, 2009). As Kenton (2010) suggests, 'in whatever form, diary is an important method to capture the practices and experiences of everyday life'. In this research, I hoped diary methods would allow me to recognise participants' relations to and engagements with WeChat in everyday settings.

Second, in this research, diary-keeping was designed to be used prior to the ethnographic interviewing. Thus diaries were used as prompts in subsequent ethnographic interview discussions. This is what Corti (1993) calls 'the diary diary-interview' method which refers to 'the diary-keeping period followed by an interview asking detailed questions about the diary entries'. This is considered to be 'one of the most reliable methods of obtaining information' from participants (Corti, 1993). In her research, Kenton (2010) used the diary interview method to access the ways in which people who self-identified as queer perceived and understood their sexuality in everyday lives. She found that diary interviews provided opportunities for respondents to explore and contextualise their entries as well as to discuss how the narratives of the self were developed or concluded since the completion of diaries. Similarly, Kennedy and Hill (2018) used diaries as elicitation devices in focus groups to explore participants' feelings of their everyday engagements and encounters with data and data visualisations. Thus, the documented habits and experiences in diaries and the meaning participants attach to them can be used to inform the conduction of the following interviews.

4.3.3 Document analysis

Another method used to answer the research questions was document analysis. This approach was used to address what WeChat does and how it works (on/with mobile devices) in mediating people's everyday practices in relation to WeChat from the perspective of the platform. It involved critically analysing documentation produced by the platform, such as WeChat terms and conditions, privacy policies, and other official WeChat publicity material, as well as a sample of relevant tech blogs and media commentaries.

Document analysis is a common method in platform studies for understanding the intentions and workings of platforms. In their analysis of Twitter, Baym and Burgess (2020) construct a 'platform biography' (a timeline of platform emergence and evolution) of Twitter and account for its changing business models and technical infrastructure by looking at changes to the Twitter landing page, homepage, and instructions/tutorials over time, as well as published company histories and blogs and commentaries from tech industry and third party developers. Similarly, John (2017) traces the changes of meaning of sharing and how a range of platforms started to describe what they invite users to do as 'sharing' by analysing the different versions of various social media platforms' homepages, front pages, FAQ pages, and their officially released documents and company blog archives. By looking at the ToS (terms of service) and privacy policies of digital platforms, blog posts and news articles, van Dijck (2013a) observes that social media platforms monetise user activities by aggregating and selling the data produced by users and their interactions with others on the sites. For example, Facebook highlights the ostensible valuing of sociality and connectedness of the Like button on the platform interface, while concealing the market value of the feature and the connectivity it enables between Facebook and external websites (van Dijck, 2013a). According to Bucher (2018), to explore the ways in which and for what possible purpose the platforms work, a critical and close reading of publicly available documents describing the workings of digital platforms is needed. Consequently, document analysis is an essential method to research how the platform functions and operates (on mobile devices), how WeChat mediates users' everyday practices, and to what extent it does so.

However, there may be limitations on what this approach reveals because digital platforms are notoriously 'black-boxed'. The concept of the 'black box' (Pinch, 1992) has long been used in Science and Technology Studies, highlighting the 'secret, hidden, unknown' (Bucher, 2016, p.84) characteristics of the internal workings of the technologies. This means that digital platforms are 'not open to scrutiny and their source code is hidden inside impenetrable executable files' (Kitchin, 2017, p.20). This is because the coding and programming that are the 'intellectual property' of digital platforms often occur in private settings, such as within companies (Kitchin, 2017). As a result, it can be difficult to access how a platform mines data, produces results, and performs tasks (Kennedy, 2016). In other words, it is impossible to determine how the platform exactly works. In this sense, WeChat may keep its intentions hidden and obscure commercially sensitive information, and thus I may not completely understand the workings of WeChat that mediate and shape individuals' everyday practices. Nonetheless, undertaking these activities will provide a particular facet of WeChat's underlying intentions, what it does and how it works (on/with mobile devices) to at least some extent. With this layer of analysis, we may possibly understand the mediation of the platform (and mobile device) in everyday life.

4.4 Ethnographic Interviewing and Linked Diaries

4.4.1 Selecting participants

Age has been identified as an important factor that shapes the distinct ways in which different people engage with social media platforms (Pfeil, 2008; Tang and Liu, 2015). For example, it is found in Chinese social media studies that the younger generation is more interested in incorporating social media like WeChat into different aspects of their lives whereas the older generation seems to have a narrower focus on social media usage (Tang and Liu, 2015; Pang, 2012). It is also suggested that whilst younger people tend to use social media platforms to express themselves and share personal thoughts and feelings (Zhou, 2015), older people are inclined to keep personal data private (Chen, 2017) and to share non-original content such as forwarding articles they are reading and distributing links in which they are interested (Wang and Xia, 2020; Qiu and Li, 2016). In his research, Zhou (2019) points out that although both younger and older people proactively engage with platform-driven content, the former shows more sceptical attitudes and therefore are more pragmatic in their engagements with the

platform than the latter. Considering the high proportion of both young and older groups using WeChat (Iqbal, 2021; Thomala, 2020), it would be interesting to study users' everyday practices across different age groups. By including these participants, firstly, it is possible to investigate the differences and similarities of generational practices and perceptions in relation to WeChat; secondly, it is beneficial to find out how a single platform works for and meets the requirements of these different groups.

In addition to age, region is the other sampling criteria in this research, considering that WeChat is a global phenomenon. There are mobile applications that are predominantly adopted and used by inhabitants of a specific country (Xue et al., 2019) and migrants have incorporated social media platforms which are popular in the local areas into their everyday lives (Jackson and Wang, 2013; Lin et al., 2012). Yet it has been suggested that WeChat is popular even outside China (Matemba and Li, 2018; Opeyemi et al., 2018), and that WeChat is essential for the Chinese diaspora to maintain and manage connections (Koreshkova, 2018), access information and make payments (Ju et al., 2019). Thus it would be interesting to investigate whether and how WeChat is differently adopted in everyday life in distinct contexts and how people from specific geographic areas might interact with WeChat in particular ways. This thesis intends to explore the differences among WeChat users of different places and backgrounds, in line with the work of Szulc (2016, 2018) who argues that it is important to recognise the variances and diversity of digital media uses across the globe.

Therefore, my research explores the digitally mediated practices of two age groups: a younger group aged between 18 and 30; and an older group, aged over 50, in both the UK and China. Individuals who used WeChat everyday were considered potential participants for my project and were approached using the following methods:

1. I contacted some organisations to access participants. I generated a list of organisations and approached them by email, such as Sheffield Confucius institute, UK-Chinese Times (a Chinese media company) and Hisense Co., Ltd (a Chinese electronics company) in the UK, and CNR (China National Radio), the alumni association of Sheffield University, the PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) of a high school, and a Christian church institution in China. In the message, I stated my

research objective – to investigate their uses and experiences with WeChat – and requested that they circulate to members the attached participant information sheet (see Appendix 2), which included clear information about what the project was and what participation involved. Once a person replied and agreed to participate, the individual became a formal participant and a date for interview was arranged. This, my main recruitment method, recruited 13 participants (7 in the UK and 6 in China).

2. I leafleted in public places. I visited retail stores, restaurants and shopping malls in both the UK and China and handed out leaflets to individuals. I also attended events such as a Chinese New Year gala and Dragon Boat race in the UK, and fan meetings and square-dancing activities in China, to hand out leaflets. This approach was often carried out as a result of following different communities' social media accounts, such as CSSA (Chinese Students and Scholars Association), an official fan club, a language learning group, a public square-dancing group, and a health-cultivation group, and checking their offline activities and events. The leaflet clearly stated the details of those who could take part, the study objectives of the research and my personal details (see Appendix 3). I contacted those who replied, by email or by phone, providing the participant information sheet as well as my name, occupation, and academic affiliation to establish my identity and credibility. This method proved useful, recruiting 5 participants in the UK and 9 in China.
3. I extended the number of research participants through my personal network and through snowball sampling of participants recruited via the means mentioned above. I sought and followed up introductions to friends or relatives that my personal network and participants thought might have interesting stories and be willing to share their experiences and perceptions on WeChat. This yielded 3 participants in the UK and 11 in China.

Through the methods mentioned above, I recruited a sample of 41 individuals who interact with WeChat every day (see Appendix 1 for more details). The following table (Table 1) depicts the makeup of the sample for the ethnographic interviews. The two individuals who

participated in the pilot study were included as part of the overall sample. The pilot study²⁰ was carried out when the project had received ethical approval from the university, which aimed to expose any potential, unanticipated issues prior to the fieldwork.

		Age		Gender		Ethnicity					Total
		18-30	Over 50	Female	Male	Italian	Mexican	American	British-Born Chinese	Chinese	
UK	Sheffield	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	15
	Manchester	1	2	1	2	-	-	-	-	3	
	Leeds	2	2	2	2	-	-	-	-	4	
	Liverpool	2	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	2	
	London	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	1	
	Cardiff	-	3	2	1	-	-	-	-	3	
China	Beijing	5	1	3	3	-	-	-	-	6	26
	Lanzhou	2	3	4	1	-	-	-	-	5	
	Shanghai	2	3	4	1	-	1	-	-	4	
	Guangzhou	3	2	2	3	1	-	-	-	4	
	Shenzhen	1	4	2	3	-	-	1	-	4	
No. of participants		21	20	22	19	1	1	1	1	37	

Table 1 Breakdown of participants

Given the aim of the comparison of generational and geolocational groups, I relied on purposeful sampling and the sampled users came from different age groups and different locations. To obtain a balanced and representative sample from each age group, I recruited and worked with 21 younger participants and 20 older participants to access the similarities and differences in relation to their usage of the app. To explore how WeChat was used in different contexts, interviews were conducted in six places in the UK: Sheffield, Manchester,

20. The pilot study informed several changes in my research design to ensure that more people would be eligible to participate, such as fine-tuning some interview questions to make them clearer and understandable for each participant, expanding the age range, keeping diary-keeping time minimal and adjusting it to one day, reformulating the diary template and guidelines to make the research simpler and easier, and broadening the criteria for participation – participants could still take part in the research without keeping a diary.

Leeds, Liverpool, London, and Cardiff; and in five places in China: Beijing (in northern China), Lanzhou (in western China), Shanghai (in eastern China), Guangzhou (the birthplace of WeChat), and Shenzhen (in southern China). Given the unavailability of certain WeChat services (such as city services and home services) and the difficulties in recruiting older people in the UK, a relatively small number of interviews were conducted in the UK (15) compared to those in China (26). Participants represented a mix of genders (19 males, 22 females), ethnic backgrounds and professions (such as businessperson, doctor, engineer, taxi driver). As evident in the table above, the sample did contain some ethnic diversity. However, it is difficult to assess cultural and ethnic differences in WeChat-related practices because the numbers in each group were small. It is beyond the scope of this research to draw out in-depth gender differences in users' practices in relation to WeChat, although these will be underlined in the analysis where appropriate, with suggestions for future studies which bring gender into focus. There has been much debate about class in the UK (e.g. Reay, 1998; Crompton, 2008) and class classification is multi-dimensional, with the consideration of 'employment relations and conditions of occupations' to measure distinctive class boundaries, as shown in the construction of NS-SEC (The National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification). It has been argued that the delineation of the class structure in China remains a puzzle (Lui, 2015; Zou, 2015) because of the 'unique institutional settings of China's socialist market economy' (Liu, 2020, p.2). Therefore, due to the complexities of the categorisations of class, I did not attempt to make definitive comments about social class in this thesis.

4.4.2 Conducting ethnographic interviews

Ethnographic interviews were conducted face-to-face, which involved interviewing participants and observing how they expressed their perceptions, their engagements with mobile phones, and their uses of WeChat.

Interviews give access to information about the 'what, why and how' (Kvale, 1996) of individuals' perceptions of their WeChat practices and their understandings of WeChat's mediation in their everyday life. Each session lasted for an hour on average and took place in a range of locations, a consideration which will be discussed later. A schedule was devised based on the research questions and assisted with the kept diary, if any (more details about

the diary-keeping method will be discussed in section 4.4.3). The interview protocol (see Appendix 4) was used as guidance during the interviews and served as a reminder of the topics to be covered in each area. For example, I asked questions about what participants used WeChat for, how they found WeChat, and if/how their uses of WeChat had changed over time, and we discussed the ownership and customisation of their mobile phones and how they perceived their relationships with mobile phones. I carefully drafted the questions to avoid raising confidential personal issues and intruding upon participants' comfort and privacy. I was also alert in the interview to back off if it seemed that the participant was not comfortable.

Incorporating ethnographic elements into interviews meant that observation of participants' WeChat practices took place in parallel with the interviews. Thus I jumped between different themes and topics based on what participants showed me and what I observed. This enabled a more personalised approach to the conversation, which allows me to 'adapt to the scenario at hand', and facilitate the level of details offered in participants' responses, than 'stick robot-like to an established script' (Odendahl and Shaw, 2002, p.311). As a part of this process, I had to discard some interview questions that I had listed and was prompted to further explore the elements participants raised and showed during the interviews. Thus not all the listed questions were asked or asked in order during the interviews. Participants were encouraged to talk more about the issue when I considered what they showed was an interesting thread to follow. For example, when they showed me their WeChat Moments page, I invited participants to reflect upon when and why they created these posts, how they selected the content, and what they felt while posting them.

Important to add is that I familiarised myself with the data as I transcribed and read through the field notes. I tagged the issues which could be potential themes, started to prioritise relevant interview questions on the list, and encouraged the following participants to chat more about them. For example, some participants who I interviewed earlier spoke of incorporating digital money in creating and maintaining relationships through WeChat Red Packets. I then highlighted some WeChat Red Packets-specific questions in the later interviews and invited participants to share their experience of WeChat red packets

depending on the situation. More discussion of WeChat red packets and sociality will be presented in Chapter 7.

Ethnographic observation during the interviews consisted of three parts:

First, during the interview, I captured how people narrated their WeChat practices and expressed their perceptions, by paying attention to their emotions, facial expressions, body language and the language they used when speaking about WeChat. These were captured in field notes at the time of the interview.

Second, I focused on the ways in which people interacted with their mobile devices during the interviews, such as where they kept their phone, how frequently they paid attention to the device, and other physical interactions with them. This observation also involved asking people to show me around their mobile phones, such as looking through the screensaver, installed apps, ringtones and other settings, phone cover, attached accessories and other forms of customisation. These observations allowed me to understand individuals' embodied relationships with their mobile phones, capture how their phones had been personalised, and elicit conversation in relation to mobile devices and WeChat. This was helpful to understand the mediating role of mobile phones in participants' WeChat practices in everyday life.

Third, I asked participants to share with me how they behaved on and interacted with WeChat. For example, I invited participants to show me what they were referring to when they talked about their engagements with certain WeChat services; I asked them if I could look through the content they posted on WeChat when they were reflecting upon their motivations and memories of the posts. By doing this, I could observe how users engage with WeChat. These observations also aided in eliciting interviewees' reflections and interpretation of their practices and experience by contextualizing their WeChat practices and situating them in a specific context in which WeChat was being used.

I took ethnographic notes about what I saw and experienced regarding people's WeChat and mobile phone use in the interview process, which were written shorthand at first and then copied up in more detailed descriptive notes later along with the audio record of the interview.

I took some photos (if necessary) of what participants showed me for research purposes. I did not include any identifiable information (such as profile photos or usernames) and sensitive and private information when taking pictures. Participants were shown each photo and asked if they were willing to consent to their use as research data at the end of the interview. Photos inevitably included some information from other people to whom participants were connected and who were involved in their WeChat practices, but I did not use this information as research data for ethical reasons relating to a lack of consent from the other parties. For the same reason, I did not include data about other people who were mentioned by participants or whose posts and chat histories I was shown. I will bring ethical considerations together in the later ethics section.

During the ethnographic interviewing, some participants unlocked their mobile phones and showed me their WeChat in response to my request and some voluntarily shared their screens with me when they were trying to make a point. However, a small number of participants were unwilling to show me their phones during the interview, although I had previously made clear that I might ask them to show me their WeChat and mobile phones when inviting them to take part in interviews and at the start of each interview. These participants explained that they considered their mobile devices and WeChat account as personal and private things and preferred not to show/unlock their devices and login/check WeChat in my presence. I respected their wishes. That was to be expected as there were six potential participants who expressed initial interest dropped out when they became aware that participation might involve showing me around their phones and WeChat accounts. Therefore, while ethnographic interviews have generated deep and rich understanding of each individuals' mediated engagements with WeChat, they also proved complicated in practice. Thus, I was not able to observe people's interactions with their phones and engagements with WeChat in some interviews. However, the lack of ethnographic elements did not hinder the 'standard' interviews. These participants' responses offered interesting insights into how they perceived the platform and mobile phones whilst highlighting the intimate relationships they had with the platform and mobile devices, as I will discuss in detail in Chapter 5.

Even though qualitative interviewing builds on an epistemology that recognises the co-construction of meaning between interviewers and interviewees, this recognition does not exempt researchers from reflecting on ‘power, conflicts and hierarchical relationships’ between them and interviewees (Kvale, 2005, p.94). Thus researchers need to consider the ‘the ways their own assumptions and behaviour may be impacting the inquiry’ (Watt, 2007, p.1). This means that it is essential for researchers to constantly reflect upon their roles throughout the research process, although there may be limits to the extent to which the researcher can be conscious of their influence upon the research and participants (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). My disclosed status as a PhD researcher made many participants assume that I knew WeChat well and thus had an in-depth understanding of what they were referring to and discussing. This was shown through expressions including, ‘I am sure you know this...’, ‘...which you know of course’, and ‘as you must know...’. To achieve this reflexivity, I invited follow up discussions with participants to check my understanding and assumptions of what was being said and clarified any ambiguous points made during the interviews. I also reflected my positionality as a younger female researcher; this positionality was an apparent sign of difference in meeting the eight older male participants face-to-face. I felt that it was difficult to establish relationships and build rapport with these participants and that I had less control over the conversation with them than the others. The lack of mutual understanding and generational knowledge also made it difficult to encourage these participants to engage actively and contribute to a focused, ethnographic and in-depth conversation. This was one of the methodological challenges of the fieldwork. This might also have been due to my limited experience of carrying out qualitative research previously. Therefore, not all those taking part were investigated in the same depth as I would have wanted. This might reduce the possibility for exploring the multiplicity of practices in relation to WeChat and comparing levels of engagement in and perceptions of WeChat among participants, especially across two age groups.

4.4.3 Diary-keeping

I asked participants to construct a diary of their engagements with WeChat for one day prior to the interview. Participants were asked to include their practices and experiences in relation to WeChat over one day, detailing their thoughts, opinions and feelings, either in the form of

texts or visual images, such as screenshots, a template for which is shown in Table 2. An initial introduction and guidance for keeping diaries and a diary sample were also provided to help them use the diary (see Appendix 7). I hoped that the diary method would help to initiate discussion and provide me with valuable data about their WeChat practices in an everyday context.

The image displays two versions of a diary template titled "A Day with WeChat". Both versions include a header with fields for "Name:" and "Date of completion:", a WeChat logo, and a title "A Day with WeChat".

The left version shows a table with two columns: "What happened" and "Comments and screenshots". It contains four rows labeled "Entry 1" through "Entry 4".

The right version shows a similar table but with five rows labeled "Entry 5" through "Entry 9". At the bottom of this version, there is a note: "* Please feel free to add additional boxes for more diary entries ☺".

Table 2 The diary template on which participants recorded their everyday engagements with WeChat

Diaries would ideally be read prior to the interview so that I could note and make adjustments to the things beyond expectations and restructure the interview questions according to personal circumstances. For example, one participant showed her heavy reliance on WeChat Pay in everyday life. The interview thus focused more on her practices in relation to financial services afforded by WeChat than its social dimension. However, not every interviewed worked out like this, as some participants did not provide me with their diaries until the day of the interview. Therefore, I was able to read the diary and highlight the salient points, such as strong feelings about WeChat and repetitive engagement with certain WeChat features, that would then inform the conversation, while they were reading and signing the consent forms at the start of the interview.

However, the completion of the diary method did not turn out to be as useful as I thought it would be. Most participants did not keep a diary, although an incentive was provided in this

project (more details in the next section) to encourage people to produce one. Some preferred to only participate in the interview and refused to keep the diary at the start, whilst others agreed to keep a diary but were not able to do so due to time constraints or other commitments. According to Kenton (2010), the diary-keeping 'requires a sense of commitment on the part of the participants and a willingness to regularly complete the diary and follow any guidelines'. Although this could have affected research outcomes, these ethnographic interviews were smoothly conducted and generated rich data which addressed some of these everyday aspects of WeChat practices and experiences that I wanted to access. Twelve (4 in the UK and 8 in China) out of 41 participants kept a diary. The diaries had different levels of completion and the entries varied in length. Only 3 (2 in the UK and 1 in China) of the diaries were written in detail, following the guideline samples provided by me (but not as detailed as my sample). The rest of the participants wrote down a few words and brief sentences to describe their everyday practices in relation to WeChat, and some only recorded a few entries and did not fill the page. This is because they could not find enough time to fill in the diary in detail and forgot to keep the diary every time they checked WeChat, as they explained later in the interviews. Despite this, the diaries were useful elicitations for subsequent interviews and provided insights into a range of everyday WeChat practices.

4.4.4 Ethical considerations

In this section, I introduce the ethical issues that emerged in my fieldwork and how I managed them. Participants were fully made aware of the aim of the research, what the research involved and how their personal data would be used. It was made clear that information given would be kept fully confidential and anonymised, such as through pseudonyms and altering identifiable details, when processing the data and writing the thesis. Participants were also made aware that the data collected from them would only be used for the purposes of the study and destroyed after completion. This information was also provided in the participant information sheet (see Appendix 2) and made available to respondents prior to them volunteering to participant.

Integral to protecting participants in research is the need to obtain informed consent. Two written consent forms were used in this study: one for the ethnographic interview, which was

provided at the start of each interview; and one for the usage of images, which was provided at the end of each interview. The pre-consent form (see Appendix 5) listed potential ethical and practical issues involved in ethnographic interviews (and linked diaries), informing participants that the interview would be recorded and asking them if they could show me their activities with WeChat and if I could take digital photos of what they showed me. The post-consent form (see Appendix 6) listed every photo taken, and asked participants which, if any, of a range of uses they consented to (in the thesis, presentations, journal articles, and other publications). It was important that participants were aware of what would be done with the data collected from them, for example, the publication and dissemination intentions (Munhall, 1988). Participants were shown each photo and asked to consent to their use one-by-one. They could tick the appropriate box on the form to give or refuse their consent and decide which uses they gave consent for. I deleted the photo immediately if they did not want it to be used as research data. I documented what participants had consented to and sent the post-consent form to them afterwards as a password-protected PDF, with images pasted in. My personal contact details were also shared so that if participants changed their minds or had any concerns about the interview, they could contact me. It was anticipated that some participants might include screenshots in their diaries to make sense of their WeChat practices, but no images were presented in this way, so this was not an issue that required action.

Taking participants' welfare into account, those taking part were reassured that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. I was aware that there could be some discomfort in the disclosure of personal experience and accompanying feelings. Participants could decide what to talk about and share with me in the interview, what content they would like to keep in the diary, and what could be used as research data. Participants were encouraged to inform me if there were any data they were uncomfortable with being used as a part of the study. Using social media platforms involves connecting to others but using data relating to non-consenting others is problematic. This research focuses on individuals' WeChat-related practices and perceptions and thus participants were encouraged not to include either information other people had posted, any identifiable pictures (e.g. profile photos) or usernames of other people who were involved in their WeChat practices, in both ethnographic interviews and diary-keeping. I did not include information from other people

who were unavoidably shown in the interviews and/or contained in diaries as research data. I also actively assessed the transcripts, field notes, images, and diaries, sifted out any possible private issues and interactions, and only used those with the permission of participants as research data. Any sensitive and intimate data contained in the provided information, such as participants' financial problems or health conditions, was not used as research data.

Participants' were offered a choice of interview venue to enhance comfort and facilitate open dialogue. Interviews were conducted in a range of places, such as: participants' home or offices, university, a park, a library, and a café. Most participants were professionals and so their interviews occurred at nights or on weekends for the sake of convenience. All participants (including the two who took part in the pilot study) were given an incentive to participate in this project. The money was small and so intended as a token of appreciation for participants' help. It was not enough to influence their decisions or make them feel compelled to take part: a £10 Amazon gift voucher was offered to participants in the UK, which did not have tax implications for them. I was aware that these vouchers should not be set at a 'coercive' level, so I gave the £10 voucher to each participant at the start of the interview and emphasised that it was for their participation only. For cultural reasons, instead of using vouchers in China, buying drinks and meals for participants is acknowledged as a common form of recompense for taking up someone's time. Exchanging low-value gifts is also a culturally polite way to reward participants. Thus, I brought meals or drinks for interviewees if the interviews were conducted in cafés or restaurants, and gave small gifts such as chocolates and homemade cakes to those whose meetings were held in offices, homes or public places.

Following the university's ethical guidelines, I took measures to protect participants' personal data. These were outlined in detail in the ethics application of this study, which was submitted to and approved by the University of Sheffield in January 2018. Participants agreed that their interviews would be audio recorded to guarantee accuracy in the next transcription phase. These recordings were erased when they had been transcribed and checked. Any identifying documents, such as the digital diaries, transcripts and taken photos, were password-protected on a flash drive, and the physical copies, such as paper diary records and consent forms, were kept in a locked cupboard which only I had access to.

4.4.5 Data analysis

All the collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research questions, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the dataset' (p.10). Thematic analysis is a way of identifying, analysing, and describing patterns and ideas (Namey et al., 2008) and 'grouping together themes and categories that have accumulated in the field' (Madison, 2012, p.43). It enables understanding of data and linking of concepts and opinions with data (Ibrahim, 2012).

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Ethnographic notes, recorded diaries and taken photos (if any) were woven into the transcripts when transcribing. Transcription is a useful way for researchers to be immersed in the collected data (Riessman, 1993). Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that 'it is a good idea to start taking notes or marking ideas for coding', especially when the data were collected through interactive methods, such as ethnographic interviewing (p.87). Thus, the transcription and analysis of the interviews started at a relatively early stage. The first stage of coding was inductive. I sought to identify key themes while transcribing interviews and combining field notes pertaining to my observations. I also sought to familiarise myself with the data by producing summary reports of several interviews when they had been transcribed. The summarised content and my personal reflections upon the interviews helped me draw out potential themes as I engaged with the data. I noted down the potential themes that had emerged in the page's conversation at the bottom of each page. Most codes at this stage were standalone notes, including, for example: privacy, reluctance to share, monetary connections, work and life balance. These themes being pulled from the data were consistent with the following detailed analysis, which was reassuring.

The work of indexing and retrieving the data in the next stage was conducted deductively in NVivo, a software programme assisting with coding and managing datasets. I read through the transcripts line by line to look for emerging patterns and noted down themes as I saw them appearing in the data. Each theme was clearly defined and accompanied by a detailed description of what it concerned. Although the repetition and agreement on a certain topic

(within and across data sources) that was integral to the overall research aims and focus could be considered as a theme, certain issues raised by a small number of participants also warranted being considered a theme. For example, although only one participant in this research spoke of his concerns about the comprehensiveness of WeChat and its data mining, it raised important issues related to the workings of the platform and required further exploration of what happened to the comprehensively captured datasets of an individual. It was therefore deemed worthy of inclusion in the thesis (more discussion can be found in Chapter 8).

I then looked again at the themes that had been pulled out in the initial stages and organised them into core themes or displayed them as main codes. After that, I pieced together relevant subthemes from different codes and conglomerated them into wider thematic categories if needed. In doing so, I sought to explore the relationship between categories and make links between participants' narratives of consistent topics and draw out similarities and differences as they became apparent across transcripts throughout the entire transcription process. For example, I analysed in detail what WeChat users said about the phenomenon, and how they discussed it in different ways or how they differed from their counterparts. To illustrate, one of the main themes identified was 'reluctance to share'. This theme was viewed as having several subthemes, including privacy concerns, self-censorship, audience scrutiny, and mobile phone operation. All these sub-codes contributed to the understanding of individuals' differing reasons for reluctance to share on WeChat. Such data also acted as reference points that enabled comparison across groups (young and old, UK and China) for further analysis. For example, although there was not much difference between users in the UK and China in terms of (not) sharing on WeChat, older participants were more likely to include certain themes, such as sharing privately and sharing to oneself, than their younger group counterparts (more discussion on this will follow in Chapter 6).

The themes and subthemes in this research were the products of a process of reading and rereading of the transcripts and field notes. Data analysis is a recursive process, which according to Braun and Clarke (2006), 'involves a constant moving back and forward between the entire dataset, the coded extracts of data that you are analysing, and the analysis of the data that you are producing' (p.86). Through an iterative process of reviewing, editing, and

updating identified (sub)codes as they developed or changed, the data were drawn together into themes and arguments that could be further explored in empirical chapters.

4.5 Document Analysis

4.5.1 Selecting documents

Fifty documents (see Appendix 8) were collected and critically analysed in this research to address aspects related to what the WeChat app does and how it works (with/on mobile devices) in mediating and shaping people's everyday practices. Two categories of documents were distinguished: documentation produced by WeChat; and media coverage and commentaries.

The first category of documents was collected through the Tencent and WeChat official websites and WeChat official blog archives, such as WeChat Terms of Service, Privacy Policy, Payment System User Service Agreement, Tony Ma's (CEO of Tencent Holdings) public speeches at summit conferences, and Allen Zhang's (President of WeChat Group) presentations at annual WeChat Open Class PRO events. I included Ma and Zhang's presentations because, as Chen and colleagues (2019) argue, 'the mindsets and aspirations of top executives (e.g. tech company's founders) have a great impact on the design of their products and the entire ecosystem that anchors on WeChat' (p.20). A total of 19 documents were collected and recorded in this phase. I did not keep track of the changes of official documents. A platform's policies change regularly in accordance with changes made to the platform, in how the company plans to make profit from the platform, or in the policies enacted by the government (Marotta-Wurgler, 2014). Users will generally not be notified by WeChat when it makes changes to its policies.²¹ This makes it hard for researchers to track the changes. Also, WeChat does not provide dates or version numbers for several policies, such as *Agreement on Software License and Service of Tencent WeChat* and *WeChat Payment System User Service Agreement*. It is thus difficult to determine whether and what changes the company had actually made compared to the old versions. Thus, this research collected and analysed the latest version of WeChat's policies and agreements (if possible) at the time

21. As a WeChat user since 2011, I was only notified once by WeChat in 2017 about the terms of the changes made to its privacy policy.

of writing, the last updated dates of these documents vary from November 2015 to September 2020 (see Appendix 8). In addition, this research did not focus on WeChat biographies or explore whether and how these changes would have significant impact on individuals' practices in relation to WeChat. Thus, tracking changes of WeChat documentation was not relevant to this research.

The second category of documents was sourced from:

1. News reports and articles: I fell into a habit of keeping a document analysis diary, including reading and taking notes of news reports and articles that were relevant to WeChat during the research. This step enabled me to keep up-to-date on what was happening with WeChat and these notes also suggested ideas for further data collection and selection for the media criticism and tech blog commentaries.
2. Tech blog-following: I followed 10 famous tech blog websites (such as *Huxiu*, *36kr*, *ifanr*) and two well-known personal tech bloggers (including William Long and Hu Yong) in China. I continued checking the updates of their blog posts and searched key items such as WeChat within their sites.
3. Notes from ethnographic interviews: I noted down the preferences, dislikes, and questions participants raised in the interviews and highlighted some salient points to follow up in the document analysis. I then carried out key words searches in both Google and Baidu to look for documents that were related to the specific aspects covered in the ethnographic interviewing and linked diaries, which could provide explanations for and elaboration of the raised issues. For example, a technical blog applied 'reversed engineering', which is one approach to understand the workings of algorithms (Kitchen, 2017), in an attempt to explore the algorithmic allocation of WeChat's group Red Packets. This commentary could help explain the confusion about the varied amounts received in each WeChat Red Packet within groups, as some participants expressed throughout the interviews.

4. Snowball sampling: some documents created links to and quoted the text, audio and video from other documents within the current text. I snowballed out by looking into relevant documents associated with the existing documents.

I collected a sample of 90 documents that matched the aims and objectives of the research using the methods mentioned above. These documents were read online first as this step helps researchers gain an 'understanding of the document in context and how it is meant to be viewed' (Snee, 2010, p.4). Each document was recorded in a table, which contained: a reference number, links to the documents, category of documents, institutional or individual documents, and whether the document was suitable to be included in the sample. Limitations were set to ensure the quality of the collected documents. Documents were included in the sample if they met at least one of the following criteria on first reading:

1. Documents relating to the workings of WeChat (and its provided services)
2. Documents relating to the development of WeChat in a bigger context
3. Documents relating to the operation of mobile phones and applications

I then read these documents more closely to double check if they met the above criteria and at the same time met both of the following criteria:

1. Documents were collected from original and reliable sources and had not been subsequently edited. This step is to ensure the authenticity and credibility of the material (Scott, 1990).
2. The evidence of documents was clear and comprehensible, and the content was appropriately situated within the context. I checked the original content if the author used second-hand sources.

Thirty-six relevant documents were then included in a new repository with a brief description after evaluating their quality and relevance. However, online documentation are often constantly changing. It was found that some could not be accessed or found, and some became incomplete and inconsistent when revisiting the sites. I therefore had to take a

practical decision to exclude such materials to ensure the comprehensiveness and completeness of the collected material. This led to a final sample of 31 items of media coverage and commentaries (see Appendix 8).

4.5.2 Ethical considerations

The first type of documents collected were publicity material produced by WeChat and Tencent and so informed consent was not required for this collection. Similarly, the gathered media commentaries and news articles of the second category of documents were publicly accessible online, thus informed consent for these documents was not required. According to Hewson and others (2003), 'data that has been deliberately and voluntarily made available in the public Internet domain can be used by researchers without the need for informed consent' (p.53).

Documents in relation to personal blogs by media critics and technology activists were collected and analysed according to ethical guidelines produced by The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR). Although the data collected from personal blogs was all available and accessible online, their producers might not have been fully aware of who could access it when producing it. They might believe their contributions were private and wished to maintain anonymous (Bassett and O'Riordan, 2002; Snee, 2010). As discussed in Chapter 2, individual understandings and expectations of privacy are ambiguous and changing, and the distinction between public and private space is blurred in the digital context. People may have expectations of the appropriate flow of their shared online content; ignoring their expectations can be seen as a violation of people's right of privacy (Nissenbaum, 2009). In other words, privacy is a concept that must include a consideration of expectations and consensus. As such, capturing and analysing bloggers' contributions without consent may not match their expectations of the flow of information and can be understood as unethical behaviour. As noted in the 2012 version of the AoIR ethics guidelines, researchers cannot assume a person is wholly removed from the online datasets.

Recognising personal bloggers' rights as authors, I sought informed consent to cite their work, especially when personal data were contained in their blogs. To gain informed consent for

the research being carried out upon them and/or their data, I contacted these bloggers, clarified the situation, and respected their wishes in terms of making their work visible. All the personal details and identifiable information were anonymised and kept confidential when storing and processing the data. I paraphrased quotes when needed and tried to avoid directly quoting from blogs as the content can be found and searchable online, make the writer and their personal information identifiable. However, some authors might actually want to be recognised for the work that has gone into their blogs when taking their expert identities into consideration (Snee, 2010). These bloggers were instead treated the same as journalists who had written a news article, for instance. Once permission was received, their blogs were considered as published materials and did not require informed consent. Links were provided to their personal blogs to make them recognisable when writing up the research.

4.5.3 Analysing documents

Each sampled document was saved as a single text file and then uploaded to NVivo for analysis. Collected videos and audio were directly imported into NVivo as it supports multimedia data. I took a standard qualitative thematic analysis to examine these documents. This involved a careful, focused meaning reading and re-reading of the documents, recognising emerging themes that were pertinent to research questions, and linking to the themes that were identified in the ethnographic interviews (and linked diaries).

My analytical task for documents focused on the text itself, centring on the content and meaning of the documentation. Two important parts were taken into consideration in this process: the workings of WeChat; and the workings of WeChat *on* mobile devices. It is through a process of 'evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed' (Bowen, 2009, p.33). In terms of the workings of WeChat, I formulated a list of questions to support my analysis, for example, how does WeChat present and brand itself, what does WeChat claim about what it tries to do, what are its functions, how is a specific argument and idea developed, how does it relate to and conceive of (and package) users, and how does it store, release and use the personal information it collected? This step aided in exploring what WeChat does or intends to do and thus in understanding

the ways in which WeChat shapes people's everyday practices. When looking at the workings of WeChat *on* mobile devices, things to be considered included: what WeChat services are enabled by mobile phones, whether and how WeChat collects users' location data, and how WeChat enables daily transactions through the use of mobile payments. This step helped reveal the role of the mobile phone in activating WeChat features and thus shaping everyday practices in relation to WeChat. In this process, I actively looked for codes that had come from the documents and noted them down as I saw them emerging in the data. These codes included data ownership, locational privacy, WeChat user profiling, etc. and were connected to and clustered under the main codes organised in the interviewing data. I also looked at the themes that had been organised in the interview transcripts and field notes and directly applied some of them to the analysis of documents, such as WeChat Moments ads, monetary connections, and mobile phone operation, etc.

One of the issues that is unavoidable in document analysis is the potential presence of biases, both within a document and from the researcher. Documents are often written from a specific perspective or understanding of the social world (Rapley, 2018) and have a specific audience and purpose (Yin, 1994; Bowen, 2009). As Owen (2014) argues, 'documents do not and cannot exist in a pure form, they are always refracted through the mind of the writer' (p.10). Thus, the documents are created with particular intentions in mind and could be personally, culturally, politically and institutionally affiliated. This might mean that the inclusion of the documentation, especially the coverage, commentaries, and tech blogs, would have painted a different picture because of different composition and interpretation. Thus, I considered the subjectivity and potential bias authors might have brought to their contributions when approaching and analysing the documentation. As a result, the context of the documents was 'read' and analysed; the readability level of documents, the intended audiences and implied readership, and the way in which the documents were displayed and circulated were also paid attention to. Paying attention to such matters might help assess the credibility and meaning of the documentation (Scoot, 1990).

The possibility of complete objectivity and of the intrusion of the researcher's 'personal values or theoretical inclinations' would appear to be impossible in qualitative research like document analysis (Bryman, 2012, p.392). As Buckle and others (2010) point out, there is 'no

neutrality in any research endeavour, there is only variation in the extent to which researchers recognize and document their subjectivity and bias' (p.120). I was influenced by critical work about platform monopolies and thus might have had the tendency to read the documentations of the workings of WeChat through a critical lens. This might have lead to my criticism towards WeChat, to particular research priorities of the platform element of the three-part model, or to analysing the collected data in particular ways. To achieve this reflexivity, I opened myself up and distanced myself from that tendency, and adhered to the approach I took to conduct the research which sees WeChat as both extracting value from users and as digital technologies about which users can exercise some agency. In recognition of this point, I sought to present the meaning of the documentation by not making changes or removing what the original content conveyed when interpreting the communicative and informative intents of the documentation. Doing so would help ensure that the document analysis results could be credible and valid (Bowen, 2009).

4.6 A Note on Translation

Whereas a small number of interviews were conducted in English and some official documents produced by WeChat have English versions for international audiences, most of the data (including diaries, interviews, field notes and documents) collected in this research were in Chinese. This meant that I had to translate some collected data from Chinese into English since the results of the research are presented in English. Yet, changing language 'involves more than a simple change of words' (Temple, 2008, p.355). Translation is considered to be an interpretative action and language differences may generate additional challenges in the process of transcription and interpretation, such as the loss of meaning in translation and in phrases that are difficult to translate directly (Van Nes et al., 2010). Thus, to ensure that the distance between the meanings articulated by the participants and meanings as interpreted by the researcher is as close as possible – to ensure the validity of qualitative research – careful attention must be paid in transcribing and translating data (Polkinghorne, 2007).

All the diaries, interviews (and field notes) and documents were kept in their original forms. It would have been a difficult and time-consuming job to completely translate all of these

data, which amounted to over 60,000 words. Therefore, I chose to analyse the data first and then translate the important data when needed. Staying in the original language of the collected data for a long time also helped me avoid potential limitations in the analysis as there is a certain impact on analysing data in a different language than a researchers' own (Van Nes et al., 2010). To ensure the validity of my research, I not only translated the concepts expressed in the sentences but also integrated their 'local contextual knowledge' into the translation process (Squire, 2009). For example, in Chinese, when referring to something that fits in well with a person's needs or activities, native-Chinese speakers often use the word 'good'. Yet the meaning of 'good' here could not be translated as enjoyable or to be desired/approved of, but as an expression of their feelings of 'convenience' in terms of their description of WeChat. These translations were essential to understand users' perceptions of WeChat. In addition to this, special consideration has been given to the translation of metaphors and explanation of specific concepts. I also closely rechecked the translated transcripts and documents to improve the accuracy and credibility of the translation. Recognising these issues enabled me to reflect on how I might shape the collected data and to ensure my consistent awareness of my positionality as a researcher.

4.7 Conclusion

I have addressed the research questions using combined qualitative methods and outlined the methods employed in this research, including ethnographic interviewing and linked diary-keeping and document analysis. I have laid out the research design and discussed data collection and how I managed ethical concerns throughout the research processes. Research data were analysed via NVivo primarily through thematic analysis. Whilst generalisation was not possible with the qualitative analysis due to the small sample size, my research revealed certain patterns of individuals' everyday practices in relation to WeChat. The following four chapters offer the discussion of the findings that were generated through my analysis of the empirical data.

Chapter 5. Intimate WeChat

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of four empirical chapters. It was established in the literature review that social media platforms are designed to facilitate intimate practices. They enable users to engage in ‘intimacy interactions’ (Ito et al., 2009) by creating and sustaining an ‘intimate public’ (Hinton and Hjorth, 2013) where personal and private information is disclosed and intimate connections are performed. As a result, individuals are seen to develop, sustain, and experience intimacy on social media platforms by performing and presenting distinctive versions of the self, and sharing daily minutiae, personal feelings and thoughts with a level of regularity. Given the increasing time individuals spend on and their extensive use of social media, it is made up of what Trottier (2012) calls ‘dwellings’ that diverse users occupy and cohabit. This means that social media not only act as a gateway to online information and connection but as the terrain for individuals’ everyday lives (Trottier, 2012).

Most research on intimate relationships in a social media age attends to the ones that people establish *on* platforms, including the negotiation of social relations and the performance of intimacy in public realms (e.g. Miguel, 2018; Thompson, 2008). Yet, the intimate relationships individuals establish *with* the social media platforms they inhabit have rarely been noted. Drawing on my observations as well as participants’ comments on their usage and experience with WeChat, I found that they formed differing levels of intimate feelings about WeChat which impacted on their everyday practices in relation to the app in a number of ways. In this chapter, I argue that to fully understand the ways in which WeChat relates to intimacy and mediates what people do with it, we need to look at the intimate relationships that participants develop *with* WeChat through the lens of each element of the three-part model, which includes user relations, platform relations, and mobile devices relations.

This chapter begins by considering the intimate connections enabled by WeChat. It will suggest that WeChat has been publicly accepted as an irreplaceable channel for connecting with intimate and personal relationships, reflecting that users’ everyday practices in relation to WeChat are socially constituted. This is followed by a discussion of users’ levels of

attachment to and dependence on the platform. It will explore how the comprehensiveness of WeChat and its embeddedness in everyday life shape the intimate significance it has for users and users' everyday practices in relation to it. Finally, I move on to examine the intimate relationship people have with their mobile devices through the discussion of personalisation and ownership of mobile phones, the sensorial and embodied feeling for mobile phones, and the inseparability of WeChat and the mobile phone. It will highlight the uniquely essential role that mobile devices play in people's everyday practices in relation to WeChat.

5.2 Intimate connections

The feeling of intimacy towards WeChat is provoked by what it allows users to do, in particular the social connections it creates and sustains. Nearly all participants mentioned that the main reason for starting and/or continuing to use WeChat was that 'everyone was on it'. It would appear that WeChat has become the main way for participants to build and maintain personal and intimate relationships. Here we can see that users' everyday practices in relation to WeChat are socially constituted, which is indicative of the importance of the user element of the three-part model in this process.

For instance, Bob is a 68-year-old retired white-collar worker in Shenzhen (in southern China, the birthplace of Tencent) and has been using WeChat for three years. He first started using WeChat to keep up with his old schoolmates of the high school class of 1970 and thought WeChat made it easier for him to connect with his significant others. He recounted how he was excited and surprised when an old friend who moved to Singapore about 20 years ago sent him a WeChat message:

I have no idea how he managed to find me, he was my best friend... but it's amazing that we are now in contact with each other. I spent a lot of time chatting with him and my other old friends within groups. When I find something might be of interest to them, I would directly copy the content or send links to them [in private chats], you know, to spark a discussion and maintain contact. I also send and receive red packets to them; I feel closer to them when doing so. [Showing his WeChat page] See, I use my real name and a selfie as my profile photo, so I can be easily identified by them. They know it's me, and, you know... to show I am open for a chat or something.

Bob responded to what he believed to be others' preferences for content and desires for discussion, and then adapted his sharing practices according to their interests. He also represented himself on WeChat with his real name and real profile photo to show his goodwill towards his friends and willingness to be open and available to connect. His sharing and self-representational practices in relation to WeChat were encouraged by his desire to keep his old friends in touch and maintain an intimate bond with them when being separated after a long time. This reflects how intimacy impacts on Bob's thoughts and actions (Smart, 2007; Davies, 2015), indicating the importance of the user element of the three-part model in his everyday practices in relation to WeChat. Bob also identified his practices of gifting red packets as a way of maintaining and initiating connections on WeChat. A Red Packet – digital red envelopes stuffed with digital money – is a feature of the platform which enables users to give digital cash to their contacts. In this sense, the expression of intimacy on WeChat involves monetary practices. More discussion about this topic will feature in Chapter 7.

In another example, Zac – a 25-year-old student in the UK from a single-parent family – describes himself as a people person and explicitly points out the need for intimate connections with his friends and family through WeChat. He checked his WeChat messages and Moments every now and then throughout the interview and reflected that it was the immediacy and continual connections that enabled intimacy between him and his significant others.

Zac: I pay close attention to the news feeds [unlocks mobile phone and checks Moments], because I want to reply to their messages immediately just like we are being physically together. I want to be the first one to click 'like' or comment on the post, that's what the best friends do. Also, I expect them to do the same to me. I am extremely attached to my mobile phone. I might be dead if my phone is not with me, I am even on the brink of collapse if it doesn't work well. I feel the same about WeChat.

Jiaxun: So, which is more important to you? Mobile phone or WeChat?

Zac: Can they be seen as separate? I don't think so. They are meaningless without each other. I am with my phone all the time just in case I miss any WeChat message notifications. To make a rough calculation, I think I check WeChat every 20 minutes.

Zac was 'always on' (Turkle, 2008) WeChat and made himself accessible to his friends and families. He expected timely interactions through immediate responses to others' messages and posts, so that he could maintain a sense of 'co-presence' (Ito and Okabe, 2005) and continual connections with them, despite geographical constraints. He developed a fear of missing important messages when he was not on WeChat. His desire to be always online and his constant urge to check WeChat is what scholars refer to as Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), which is characterised by the need to 'stay continually connected with what others are doing' (Przybylski et al., 2013, p.1841). As such, his everyday practices with WeChat were informed by his understanding of experiencing intimacy and intention to achieve relatedness with close relationships, underlining the importance of the user part of the model in this process. Zac also demonstrated the integration of WeChat and mobile phone, pointing out that he always kept his mobile phone close to him in order to be in constant contact on WeChat. As I have highlighted throughout, the mobile phone is the default option through which users access WeChat. This demonstrates the role that mobile phones perform in participants' like Zac's practices of intimacy and everyday connections with intimate ones. I will talk more about this in section 5.4.

However, the desire for perpetual contact on WeChat was not consistent for all levels of intimacy. WeChat enables intimacy and a feeling of 'being permanently tethered' to loved ones as well as to professional contacts. Some participants felt really bothered about their constant working connections and following engagements with WeChat. For example, Judy is 27 years old and works as a designer in Guangzhou (in southern China, birthplace of WeChat). She was responsible for designing work on a house which involved frequent communications with the client. Our interview had been interrupted twice by WeChat calls, one of which was from her client. She became WeChat friends with her client because she perceived WeChat to be a quick and convenient way for connecting, as she stated, 'it [WeChat] is the most efficient way to get in touch with them, you know, everybody is on WeChat all the time'. Underlying her friending practice is the assumption of pervasive and extensive usage of WeChat for social connections. This is a sign that WeChat has been accepted as a suitable means for making and maintaining further or regular contact. In other words, WeChat is now considered to be a default method of both socialisation and professionalism. More discussion

about users' perceptions of the role of WeChat in the formation and maintenance of relationships will follow later in this section.

Despite the convenience, the involvement of professional connections in WeChat and the constant WeChat messages from the client caused Judy to experience anxiety:

[Showing WeChat chat box] This is him [her client]. He just sent two long voice messages. He rings me [on WeChat] at all hours of the day and night. What about this? What do you think about that? I am scared of receiving calls and messages from him [on WeChat]. He's really hard to deal with. But he is my client, I feel responsible to reply to him. I want to block him, but I can't.

Similarly, Rachel, a 50-year-old accountant in a private enterprise in Lanzhou (in western China), also incorporates professional contacts into her WeChat. She describes herself as a WeChat addict and has a habit of checking WeChat messages regularly. She entirely relies on WeChat to manage her personal networks and embraces the diverse possibilities that WeChat brings to her, such as topping up mobile phones and paying for utility bills. However, she sometimes feels overwhelmed by the work-related messages on WeChat. As she comments:

I've been in quite a few work groups. They are the ones that I cannot mute and delete, and in most cases, I have to purposely ping some groups to make sure I keep up with the latest work news. It's really hard to ignore them. I use WeChat a lot, these messages pop up every time I chat with my friends or use it for payment. I cannot resist having a look at these [working] messages. I feel absolutely overwhelmed.

In the above accounts, we can see that the continual connections and reassurance afforded by WeChat can result in a situation where ambivalence arises. Judy felt responsible for being ready to connect with her client in good time and at the same time was anxious about being involved in the seemingly never-ending conversations and consequent workloads, whilst Rachel found it hard to balance her dependence on the platform with addressing everyday social and financial needs against the antagonisms of constant accessibility and availability. Both participants reflected the feeling of being excessively tethered and connected (Turkle,

2008) through WeChat. This confirms Gregg's (2011) assertion of 'presence bleed' which suggests the invasion of work into personal life with the help of digital platforms and devices in her book *Work's intimacy*. She argues that digital technologies change users' sense of availability in professional relationships and blur the boundaries between working and personal lives. As such, working tasks 'can no longer be confined to specific workplace locations or scheduled hours' but extend to personal spaces and times (Gregg, 2011, p.111). As a result, people have to constantly engage in additional working connections and workloads that are not being recognised. Thus, the embeddedness of WeChat in professional relationships and the incorporation of WeChat as a pervasive presence in everyday life creates the intimacy some users have with their work and working relations. Given that the mobile nature of the platform necessitates users checking WeChat on mobile devices, and that mobile phones have been associated with presence (Glutz et al., 2005) and habitually carried on the person, such intimacy with work connections is strengthened. Here we can see it is the 'work's intimacy' facilitated by WeChat that leads to these participants' endless presence on and practices with WeChat.

WeChat facilitates intimate connections among personal and professional contacts as well as less familiar acquaintances. For instance, Alva is a 22-year-old Daigou in the UK, who has been using WeChat since she acquired her first smartphone in middle school. Daigou, literally translated, means 'buying on behalf of', and is a person who makes money by selling luxury items such as jewellery, handbags, and watches for mainland Chinese, and posting or bringing products back to China. Alva mainly uses WeChat to manage her business, including promoting and sharing information about products on WeChat Moments and completing transactions through WeChat Pay. She only checks WeChat on her mobile phone as it is the mobility that enables her to juggle her career anywhere, any time. There are 3,988 people in her WeChat contact list, who are of different backgrounds, experiences, and careers. She comments:

Most of my WeChat contacts are my customers, but they are more than that. They are families, you know, they support my living and I cannot live without them. They also leave caring messages when I am feeling low, and we often 'like' and comment on

each other's personal Moments posts. I quite like checking Moments and knowing what happens to them, and I feel closer to those who post a lot.

Alva considered the relationship with her customers on WeChat as intimate for two reasons. One, she felt attached to her customers. Customers were like family members for her to a certain extent because they supported her both at an emotional level by showing concern and caring for her, and at a financial level by supporting her business. Two, by adding others as personal WeChat contacts, users instantaneously invited them into the intimate spheres they socially inhabited. By continually reading and interacting with her customers' posts on WeChat Moments, Alva was constantly involved in their everyday lives as they happened without needing to be physically present. Such 'connected presence' enables an 'ambient intimacy' which refers to 'being able to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that you wouldn't usually have access to' (Reichelt, 2007). This form of connectedness enables Alva to have an intimate knowledge of her customers, for example, knowing what they are up to and where they have been. Knowing the details of such seemingly small and insignificant pieces of information about others' everyday activities and experiences creates intimacy (Reichelt, 2007) and keeps existing relationships from fading (Lin et al., 2016). This explains why Alva develops a feeling of closeness towards those customers from whom she constantly reads posts in Moments. This example illustrates how the intimate connections that WeChat affords shape Alva's understanding of customer relationships and her engagements of checking and sharing on WeChat Moments.

Another participant, Zhu, is 27 years old and works in a biotechnology company in Beijing, China. He is the only child of his family and wishes he had siblings that he could share secrets and memories with. He likes to meet new people and form friendships, and thinks friends are as important as family members in his life. Amongst the total 835 contacts on his WeChat, there were at least that half Zhu had never spoken to, and at least another 200 that he could not recall the real names of. Despite this, Zhu would like to keep all these unfamiliar contacts in his WeChat and also 'liked' and commented on some of their posts in order to maintain a good *guanxi* with them as 'they are my resources, you know, I certainly will not delete them. I may build a close *guanxi* with them in the future, who knows', he stated. For Zhu, WeChat was a repository for different realms of relationships, a conduit for social connections, and a

place where *guanxi* or intimacy could potentially be forged and cultivated. As I discussed in Chapter 2, *guanxi* refers to a person's network of social relations, which is described as a set of concentric circles with the strongest and most intimate ties in the inner circles and the weakest and most instrumental ties in the outer circles (Fei, 1992). As such, the expectations and distance of *guanxi* between the self and others tend to be distinguished by the varying degrees of intimacy (Hwang, 1987). It is claimed that *guanxi* can be oriented towards an exchange of favours and social resources (Bian, 2019; Pye, 1992) and implicitly based on mutual interests and benefits (Yang, 1994). It has thus been argued that *guanxi* is seen as closely associated with the social capital that an individual has (Du, 2008; Luo, 1997) and that the social rewards are more frequently acquired through strong *guanxi* or a high level of intimacy (Bian 1997, 2019). This explains why Zhu intends to develop long-term connections with those who he was not familiar with through sharing, such as commenting and 'liking' on Moments. The effort he spent on maintaining *guanxi* or a level of intimacy was his investment in a particular relationship and an attempt to accumulate social capital for future development from which he could benefit.

Zhu's perception of *guanxi* and the sharing practices on Moments he engaged in to maintain intimacy were consistent with Ellison and others' (2007) suggestion of the expansion of friendship groups and creation of social capital through social media. They found that some people maintain relations on Facebook as they move from one offline community to another. This is because such connections could have strong payoffs in terms of increased information and opportunities, such as jobs and internships. For Zhu, with his WeChat enabled connections he could measure the levels of intimacy by making further and regular contact and engaging in future exchanges and collaborations with others. Clearly then, WeChat users like Zhu and his practices of sharing on WeChat are driven by their desire to strengthen social connections with resource allocators (Hwang, 1987) and thus to build and sustain social capital and seek social reward.

When asked further about how and why he became friends with those he was unfamiliar with, Zhu replied:

It [WeChat] becomes a trend, you know, all my close friends, family, and colleagues are on it. If a person doesn't use WeChat, it's difficult for him or her to communicate with other people. For example, I am at a party with a lot of strangers. The people sitting next to me start to make small talk. We introduce ourselves to each other and talk about our mutual friends, common interests, and even consider possible future partnerships. Everything is going smoothly, but we do not really become friends with each other until exchanging our WeChat accounts.

Zhu's response indicates the significance of WeChat for the initiation of friendship and potential future intimate relationships. In other words, adding others on WeChat has become a cornerstone for creating and establishing connections in contemporary social occasions in China; it is a trend that people tend to follow and slowly become fully dependent on. Without the gesture of exchanging WeChat accounts, all the seemingly enjoyable offline interactions are left with loose ends untied, and the possibility of *guanxi* which represents different social resources and various approaches to establish a web of social relationships (Bian, 1997), is still being denied. In other words, a *guanxi* is officially formed when people become friends on WeChat. From Judy's assumption that it is inconvenient to connect with others without WeChat, to Zhu's explanation that becoming friends on WeChat is accepted as common practice, to what I mentioned in the beginning of this section that a significant number of participants found that 'everyone's on WeChat', we can see that the extensive and wide adoption of WeChat enhances the feeling of the app being an irreplaceable channel for initiating *guanxi* and developing levels of intimacy in Chinese society. This indicates that many users' practices with WeChat are oriented by their intentions of creating and sustaining personal and intimate relationships. Therefore, the role of the user element of the three-part model in mediating user practices in relation to WeChat becomes prominent.

5.3 Intimate platform

The feeling of intimacy towards WeChat is also enabled by users' levels of attachment to the platform. As previously alluded to, WeChat is a comprehensive platform that pervades individuals' everyday lives and meet demands for their daily necessities. For a number of participants, it is a key means of messaging and payment, and a portal through which they

access diverse services including transportation, shopping, and travel. This embeddedness of WeChat in these participants' everyday relations and encounters cultivates their growing reliance on the platform and shapes the intimate significance it has for them. This is indicative of the role of the platform element of the three-part model in shaping the degree of intimacy between users and WeChat and users' everyday practices in relation to it.

For example, Sue – a 54-year-old magazine editor in Shanghai, China – has been using WeChat daily for six years. WeChat is the only app on her mobile phone's home screen. She explicitly points out her WeChat as being 'mine' and for personal use only. She makes fun of her obsession with WeChat by saying that it provides the companionship that her husband cannot offer:

I am using it all the time. I use it, you know, for paying bills, topping up my mobile phones, making appointments with doctors, and communicating with my friends and colleagues. These details are entirely personal to me. I would not, you know, pick up my partner's phone and check his WeChat, and I would not want or expect him to look at mine either. I do not think it is a shared thing. It [WeChat] is very specific to me personally.

WeChat has been incorporated into Sue's daily routines for frequent connections, payment and other daily demands. It was the personal conversations, medical records, and financial details, for example, that were kept on the platform that made it feel personal and specific enough to Sue and engendered her feelings of intimacy towards WeChat. Thus, she was attached to the information held within WeChat and showed her firm refusal to access others' WeChat accounts as well as to allow others, including her partner, to access hers. Sue's idea was shared by several participants who considered WeChat to be a repository which held personal and intimate data about themselves and thus preferred not to show/unlock their mobile phones and login/check WeChat in my presence during the interview, as I outlined in the methodology chapter. This in turn indicates the important place of WeChat in these participants' everyday lives and how their intimate feelings about the platform shape how they perceive and relate to WeChat.

Another participant, Kim, a 63-year-old retired factory worker who has been living in the UK for 40 years, has also incorporated WeChat into his everyday life. Kim described his relationship with the current WeChat version he was using as 'quite intimate' and thus barely upgraded WeChat even though the offer was constantly made to him. As he commented:

I am familiar with it [the current version of WeChat] because I am always on it. I like what it is now. It seemed like a whole new app for me every time I get it updated. I don't want to spend time to adapt to a new version. I may quit WeChat if it is not the 'old' one I know.

It was the 'always on' and trivial everyday interaction between Kim and WeChat that developed his familiarity with the platform interface – such familiarity bred intimacy for him. A new version of WeChat could lead to the unfamiliarity with the space he saw as intimate. This reflects the importance of the interface, which is the key element of platform, as I noted in the literature review, in generating his intimate feeling towards WeChat and in facilitating his willingness to engage with it. This speaks to van Dijck's (2013) suggestion that the external interfaces – including technical features, regulatory features, and elements and pathways on screen – are essential to steer connections between users and the platform and structure users' modes of practices in relation to the platform.

The intimate feeling of WeChat was also raised by Mia, a 26-year-old journalist in Shenzhen, China, as introduced at the beginning of my thesis, who organises and manages her everyday life through WeChat. She has been using WeChat for eight years and reflected on her emotional attachment to WeChat, which she could not bear to leave behind:

I cannot imagine how I can manage my day without it [WeChat]. Not-using WeChat is simply not an option for me. I can't contact other people when needed, I cannot even make payments. I cannot do a lot of things... I suddenly feel a bit sort of... a disaster?

For Mia, being without WeChat produced fears of inaccessibility to her connections, unavailability to make payments, and inability to manage her everyday life. Similarly, Wang too showed a great reliance on the functional performances of WeChat in managing everyday

life. Wang is a 66-year-old vice chancellor of a college in western China and has been using WeChat for four years. She waxed lyrical about the possibilities that WeChat brings to her and used 'so good' 'fantastic' and 'very nice' to describe her experience with WeChat and continued using these phrases during the interview. She described WeChat as an individual assistant which could be helpful in many everyday situations, such as booking a hotel, scheduling a ride, arranging a family call/reunion, making payments, and planning her day accordingly. She felt anxious, unsure and lost when she was not able to access WeChat, she reflected, 'I don't know what to do next, as everything will be in a mess'. The ubiquitous presence and thorough embeddedness of the platform in Mia's and Wang's day-to-day flows of attention and usage reflects WeChat as 'a necessary and unavoidable part of the existence' (Deuze, 2012, p.xi) and arouses a feeling of indispensability of WeChat in their everyday lives. The above comments highlight how the multiple roles of WeChat in everyday life adds to the significance it has for these participants and how such constant and increasing emotional attachment to the platform informs their understanding of the place of WeChat in everyday life and practices in relation to it. Here we can also see that both age groups incorporate WeChat in different aspects of their everyday lives in terms of the adoption of WeChat, challenging the idea that older users have a narrower focus on WeChat usage than younger users (Tang and Liu, 2015; Pang, 2012).

However, the feeling about WeChat being so essential in everyday life did not apply to all participants, especially those in the UK. Most understood WeChat as a convenient way to connect with family in the UK and relatives in China. Other WeChat services such as city services and home services had not been practised and were even known to them. This is partly due to two reasons. First, WeChat city services, such as scheduling doctor appointments and paying for utility bills, and home services such as house-cleaning services and pet grooming services, are not available in the UK. This shows how what users do with WeChat is influenced by functions performed by the platform and situational constraints attached to the platform. Second, some participants said that there was no complete substitute for WeChat in the UK and that they had a habit of using different platforms to meet their daily needs. For these participants, not being on WeChat when it was the focus of connections with their families was inconceivable, but not being on WeChat when they connected with their peer group and/or could manage alternative arrangements was

perfectly acceptable. These participants' usage of and dependence on WeChat are both closely related to what they are used to and who they connect with. This thus sheds light on the importance of regionality in shaping users' relationships with and everyday practices in relation to WeChat.

The mediation of the platform in people's intimate relationship with WeChat is also shown in its imperceptibility to a few participants. For example, Te is a 26-year-old technician in a pharmaceutical company in Shanghai (in eastern China), who only connected with WeChat on his mobile phone. He kept checking his phone during the interview and put it face down on his lap after checking every time. He recorded only two diary entries in a day and described himself as a non-WeChat person in the interview because his onerous workload left little time or enthusiasm for social media. Yet he found that WeChat was his most used app in the last 24 hours. He was not aware that he had spent nearly six hours on WeChat until he checked the Battery Usage in his iPhone settings during the interview, which showed the battery percentage used by each app and the total time the owner spent on the screen (Figure 5.1).

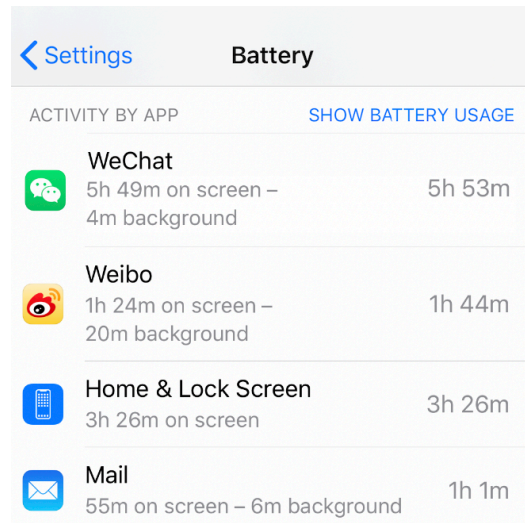


Figure 5.1 A Screenshot of Te's Mobile App Usage on the Day of the Interview

Te's contradiction between what he did and what he believed he did with WeChat indicates his underestimation of his usage of and reliance on WeChat. His practices in relation to WeChat seemed to have become a natural and intuitive part of his daily routine and faded out of his focus. This suggests that WeChat is taken-for-granted and naturalised into visibility

in his everyday life, achieving what Miller (2005) refers to as the 'humility of things'. This has the characteristics of intimacy. Te's engagement with the mobile phone through which he accesses WeChat as a material object, including frequently picking his phone up and naturally keeping his phone around, also reflected a degree of intimacy. Kember and Zylinska (2012) argue that 'our relationality and our entanglement with non-human entities continues to intensify with the very more corporeal, ever more intimate dispersal of media and technologies into our biological and social lives' (p.xv). In this way, digital media technologies are concealed within everyday life and thus 'recedes into the role of a background' (Kember and Zylinska, 2012, p.10). This is what Kember and Zylinska mean when talking about life after new media (2012). Thus, WeChat's imperceptibility to Te is a consequence of its ongoing embeddedness and entrenchment in his everyday life. It is this very invisibility of WeChat as media, or as technology, that gives the practices in relation to WeChat an intimate status which are often unknown and unseen. Here we can see the significant role that the platform element of the three-part model plays in shaping some users like Te's perceptions of and practices with WeChat in their everyday lives.

5.4 Intimate devices

WeChat is primarily experienced through mobile devices, which means that WeChat services are mobile-driven and may only be rendered through mobile phones. Thus, the feeling of intimacy towards WeChat is also related to the relationships users have with their mobile devices. The discussion about intimate devices is related to the personalisation and ownership of mobile phones, the sensorial and embodied feeling for mobile phones, and the inseparability of WeChat and the mobile phone. In this section, I seek to draw out the importance of the mobile device element of the three-part model in users' intimate feelings about and practices in relation to WeChat.

The intimate relationships people have with their mobile phones are related to the material dimension of the mobile devices. For example, Ji is a 58-year-old doctor who owns her own clinic in England. She has been living in the UK for 16 years and describes herself as a real home-loving type. The mobile phone has achieved, through its personalisation, the status of an intimate object for her. As she reflects:

I use this, a mobile phone ring stand holder. It is a gift from my daughter when I visited her in Japan. That's such a wonderful trip. My wallpaper is a photograph that my daughter has taken of a flower when she's 15, and I actually really like it on the front. This is a customised couple's phone case with Chinese ancient poetry indicating eternal love regardless of time and distance. My husband [who is in China] has the similar one. [...] I like to decorate my phone. They remind me of the valuable moments I had with my families when we are kept apart and reminds me to call and message them [on WeChat] every day.

Ji's mobile phone has been uniquely customised to have an emotional and intimate meaning beyond that of an object. She showed her fondness for the phone gadget/case and wallpaper on her screen as they formed part of her memorialisation process, with special moments always there and on show, ready to be reminisced over from time to time. This reflects Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's (1981) suggestion that objects can be bridges to another person or to another feeling, they are 'repositories for the meaning people project on them' (p.11). For Ji, the internal and external decorations of mobile phone were extensions of her intimate relationship with her family when they were not in physical proximity. Such unique material personalisation indicates the intimate character of mobile phone and acts as a stimulus to her engagements in maintaining connections with her intimate others through WeChat on an everyday basis.

In another example, Grace, a 20-year-old freelancer in Beijing, China, recently acquired a new mobile phone and kept it in her hand throughout the interview. Her affection for the mobile phone was not only about its functionality and operation but also about the object she was owning and being seen to use. As she comments, 'I am eager and excited about having this new phone. This is iPhone X, the newest and the most popular model [looking at her phone and fiddling with it]. This is the one I intend to have for a long time'. Her yearning for a particular make and model when acquiring a mobile phone is a sign that the mobile phone has become part of a person's external identity (Ling, 2004). When asked what her new phone meant to her, she replied, 'I think it means... fashion and wealth, to a certain extent'. For Grace, the newest iPhone represented her identity and projected an image she would like to

convey to others: fashionable and rich. Here the mobile phone as an object is 'a miniature aesthetic statement about its owner' (Katz and Sugiyama, 2005), which functions as a status symbol (Berger, 2009) and is seen as a reflection of the self (Hjorth, 2006). As such, her selection of mobile objects is not just informed by what they do but what they signify. This reflects Hulme and Truch's (2006) and Vincent's (2006) suggestions that the mobile phone gradually becomes an icon for the user and an articulation of who they are. In other words, a mobile phone is seen as closely associated with the performative acting of one's identity. As such, the material aspect of the phone is indicative of a degree of intimacy between the user and mobile phone in what mobile phone ownership and its use 'communicate about the person' (Fortunati, 2002).

When asked if the way she engaged with WeChat has changed over time, Grace naturally linked the changes to her ownership of the new phone by commenting:

I think I am more interested in posting on Weibo than WeChat now. You know, when I change my status on Weibo, it displays 'sent from iPhone X'. But on WeChat, it's just my post.

Grace's construction of the self online was driven by her sense of relatedness to her mobile phone which communicates an image of her as fashionable and rich. Yet, her desire to deliver this particular self-image to her audience was constrained by WeChat, which did not allow her to attach the specific phone model to each of her post. She thus engaged with Weibo as an alternative platform to objectify the mobile phone to represent herself. This example indicates how the materiality of the mobile phone shapes Grace's feelings of intimacy towards her new phone and the ways in which she incorporates the mobile phone in her construction of self-image. It also reflects upon how the platform part works with the mobile phone part of the model to limit how she self-represents and thus drives her away from WeChat.

The intimate relationships people have with their mobile phones are also shown in their great sentimental feelings for always having the mobile devices with them. For example, Mia, the 26-year-old journalist who could not live without the presence of WeChat, clutched her phone to her chest while talking about it, 'I will make sure I have my mobile phone in my pocket or

in my hand'. Similarly, Jane, a 54-year-old officer at a state-owned enterprise in Shanghai, China, who considers her mobile phone to be a lifelong companion, felt the same. She wore her smartwatch on her left wrist and kept her phone in her hand throughout the interview, commenting: 'I always wear my smartwatch and have my phone next to me, even when I am sleeping'. Here we can see that these participants have mobile devices with them at all times, wearing them close to their bodies or placed nearby, day and night. This is a sign of the existing intimacy between them and their mobile devices. According to Garde-Hansen and Gorton (2013), the sensory contact and multiple methods of physicality are the first steps to elicit affective relationship between the user and the device. The intimate proximity to and physical interactions with the mobile devices, such as the touch of the hand, felt on the body, and repetitive clicking and holding, enable an intimate feeling to be imbued in the mobile phone (Hjorth and Kim, 2004; Vincent, 2005). Thus, mobile phone is considered to be an everyday 'intimate object' (Fortunati, 2002; Lasén, 2004).

In addition to the inseparability of bodies and mobile devices, the entanglement of the platform and mobile phone was also pointed out by these participants. As Mia continued to highlight, 'you know... without having a mobile phone, you cannot even log into WeChat. It is based on mobile phones'. This idea was shared by Jane, who commented, 'basically, you have to go through your phone first when checking WeChat. Even if you want to do WeChat desktop, it needs mobile phone verification'. Their words indicate the feeling of the necessity of having a mobile phone to engage with WeChat in their everyday lives. This is because WeChat is a mobile-first and mobile-specific platform, as I have highlighted throughout, which can be seen as a 'standard' part of the mobile device equipment (Goggin, 2014). It is designed by and entangled in mobile phone-based social practices. Here we can see how the mobile phone is intimately close to the body and deeply entangled with the platform, which is indicative of the essential role of mobile phones in connecting WeChat and individuals and thus mediating these participants' practices in relation to WeChat.

A conversation with Qing, a 28-year-old product manager in the UK, further illustrates this point. It was observed that his mobile phone was practically glued to his right hand throughout the interview. He also commented, 'I feel my phone is part of my body, I need them to be with me whenever I go. Otherwise, I feel I am not me.' We can see that his mobile

phone was carried closely in Qing's hand and increasingly assimilated as 'extensions of the body' (Campbell, 2008; Richardson, 2007; Vincent, 2014). Such a feeling of physical integration indicates a great sense of intimacy and closeness between Qing and his mobile phone. Qing continued to comment that accessing WeChat anytime anywhere was the main reason for keeping his mobile devices around. As he reflected, 'it is the only app I am always on, all day, every day. If I am not on WeChat, I must not be with my mobile phone. But that won't happen'. He did not necessarily think of 'going on WeChat' as a discrete form of experience, but instead experienced being on WeChat as an extension of an embodied way of being and acting in his everyday life. The mobile phone which connects him and WeChat as 'a part of his body' erases the separation between WeChat and the self. As such, 'me and my mobile WeChat' exists as one single entity for Qing. Such an assembly achieves what Haraway (1985) calls 'cyborgs', beings with biological and mechanical parts. This metaphor rejects the rigid boundaries between human and machine, indicating the increasing integration of technology into everyday life. Haraway (1985) argues that technological tools become so attached to a limb and shape individuals' sensory experiences of the world, which thus are increasingly 'stuck to the skin'. In this sense, the more habitual the WeChat use, the less chosen detachment there is, and the closer we come to making ourselves into cyborgs. According to Lupton (2014), 'as technologies have transmuted into digital forms, particularly into smaller and more easily wearable and even ingestible forms, they become less obvious where the body ends and the technology begins' (p.80). Here we can see that some participants like Qing come to closely associate themselves with WeChat, as part of them, speaking to the intimate place of WeChat in their everyday lives. This also indicates how the platform and mobile phone elements of the three-part model are closely intertwined and crucial to understand the ever-blurring relationship between WeChat and ourselves and how parts of ourselves and what we do are being shaped.

Yet while WeChat's integration into mobile phone may enable an embodied experience of WeChat use for some, it can create difficulties for others to differentiate between the two, especially for older users. For example, Lily, a retired chef in her 60s who has been living in the UK for 43 years, is the mother of two daughters, both of whom work in London, while she lives alone in a small town in Wales. She embraces the possibilities that the mobile phone brings to her and considers it as a walking stick in her everyday life, as she rationalises, 'I can

do nothing without it, like reading news or chatting with others. It's like a stick, otherwise, I feel blind and deaf'. For Lily, her mobile phone acts as a reliable way to access information and make connections. Yet, she conflated WeChat with the mobile phone when answering interview questions and seemed unsure about whether the accessibility was afforded by WeChat or her mobile phone. Similar confusion was also shown in the conversation with William, a 50-year-old who works as a financial officer in an educational training centre in Beijing, China. He was born and raised in northern China and was the oldest child of four siblings. He considered his mobile phone to be an essential tool to connect with the families who lived in his hometown and to make online transactions in everyday life. He keeps his mobile phone on 24/7 and always keeps it charged because battery dip was the thing he feared most in the world, as he replied, 'my heart skipped a beat if my phone is dying'. Yet when asked if he could clarify whether he referred to the mobile phone or WeChat in terms of making calls or payment, he answered, 'are they just the same thing? I think they are pretty similar.'

Both William and Lily seemed to equate WeChat with mobile phones and mixed up the workings of the two. This is partly because the platform functions the same way as their mobile phones in their everyday lives. WeChat seamlessly integrates a range of functions of the mobile phone, creating the conditions under which WeChat is the mobile phone for supporting as many services as possible. The configuration similarities between WeChat and the mobile phone are enhanced through the launch of Mini-programmes which allow users to access other platforms within WeChat without downloading the stand-alone apps to their smartphones. Mini-programmes are stored on and streamlined within WeChat in the same way as apps are on mobile phones, offering similar experiences of engaging with WeChat and using a mobile phone. In addition, as I have highlighted throughout, users have come to depend on the mobile device through which they access the platform due to the unique mobile device-platform relationship of WeChat. This further blurs some users' sense of the distinction between what services are provided by WeChat and what are enabled by their mobile phones. As a result, for them, WeChat is the mobile phone and mobile phone means WeChat. Clearly then, it is the comprehensiveness of the platform and the inseparability of platform and mobile phone that shapes people's understandings of WeChat and mobile phones and their perceptions of their experiences and practices with WeChat. The mediation

of the platform and mobile device elements of the three-part model appears to be significant in this process.

In the above cases, the older group reported greater confusion in comparison to the younger group. One way to interpret this difference is that the younger group may have a deeper understanding of digital technologies and be more familiar with the operation of the platform than the older group. This speaks to the perspective of the younger generations as 'digital natives', who were born in the digital age and are "native speakers' of the digital language of computers and the Internet' (Prensky, 2001), thus supposedly more knowledgeable about technology and more capable of developing the skills of automatically understanding new technologies than older generations who are seen as 'digital immigrants' who have engaged with digital technologies later in their adult life (boyd, 2010). Clearly, age is one of the important factors that contributes to users' understandings of and relationships with WeChat.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has offered detailed accounts of different ways in which WeChat is increasingly intersecting and intertwining with intimate practices and relationships, as reflected by those who were interviewed. My argument is that, to understand the intimate dynamics of WeChat in everyday life, it is necessary to consider how they are related to each element of the three-part model.

The user part of the model has proven significant to understand individuals' intimate relationships with WeChat. I found it is the intimate others located on WeChat and the intimate connections enabled by WeChat that engender users' feelings of intimacy towards WeChat. Most participants' everyday practices in relation to WeChat were oriented by their perceptions of digital intimacy and desire to connect with different realms of relationships. I also spoke in depth about the irreplaceable role that WeChat plays in forging and maintaining relationships in individuals' everyday lives, highlighting that *guanxi* and levels of intimacy were maintained and managed to accumulate social capital for future development from which some participants could benefit. This section aimed to contribute to the current work in relation to the experience and understanding of intimacy within the context of social media.

Discussion also highlighted the mediating role that the platform part of the model can play in users' intimate relationships with WeChat. Whilst some users' feelings of intimacy toward WeChat were oriented by a large volume of personal and intimate information that is kept on WeChat, others' feelings of indispensability towards and strong reliance upon WeChat were cultivated by the multiple roles of WeChat in managing their everyday lives. It was also proposed that the platform was intimately interlocking into individuals' everyday lives to the extent that WeChat use was filtered out and became part of the background, enabling a few users' practices with WeChat to be forgotten and remain peripheral to their vision. Recognising the taken-for-grantedness and the very imperceptibility of WeChat contributes towards an understanding of wider implications of social media in everyday life.

Consideration was also given to the importance of mobile devices in mediating the intimate relationships people have with WeChat. Discussion demonstrated that the personalisation and ownership of mobile device were both key elements that engender some users' intimate feelings about their mobile devices and influence how they approach WeChat. I also outlined how mobile devices were intimately close to human bodies and deeply entangled with WeChat, highlighting the essential role of mobile phones in connecting WeChat and individuals and enabling an assembly of 'me and my mobile WeChat' for some participants. Such an assembly erased the separation between WeChat and the user, achieving the 'cyborg dream' (Haraway, 1985). This finding contributes to the discussion of the relationship between human and digital technologies and expands the currently limited understanding of how social media 'are intimately incorporated into routine bodily practices' (Beer, 2012, p.362).

We can also see that the intimacy between users and WeChat was experienced with ambivalence. For example, while some participants embraced the continual 'co-presence' and constant connections with personal and intimate relationships, including families, friends, and even less familiar acquaintances, others felt bothered about the endless online presence and being permanent tethered to social relations, especially professional ones. Whilst most participants' everyday practices in relation to WeChat were enabled by the attachment to the platform and enhanced by their intimate relationships with their mobile phones, for a few the platform and mobile phone combination constrained their intention to construct a

particular sense of self and thus drove them away from WeChat. Whilst WeChat's integration into mobile phones enabled an embodied experience of WeChat use for some, it led to others' confusion of what was the phone and what was WeChat. Such understanding of the workings of the two was clearer in the younger group than the older group. Thus the difference in users' perceptions of and practices with WeChat was related to age. It was also recognised that participants in the UK were less attached to and dependent on WeChat than their China-based counterparts. As such, location was another factor that contributed to the distinct levels of engagement with WeChat in everyday life.

In this chapter, I outlined how each of the three parts of the three-part model engenders intimacy and how the intimate relationship people have with their WeChat shapes their everyday practices in relation to it. The next chapter will draw out users' reluctance to share and the complexities and nuances that arise in such reluctance. It will propose that users act with agency in the decision-making process that they go through when sharing on WeChat, highlighting the importance of the user element of the three-part model in this process.

Chapter 6. Reluctance to Share?

6.1 Introduction

It was established in the literature review that sharing is integrated into everyday life as an expressive and communicative practice with the popularization and adoption of digital platforms, particularly social media platforms. John (2013a, 2017) summarises sharing as a ‘constitutive activity’ in the digital context and suggests that the scope of common understanding of sharing is extended – exchanging information, updating a status, posting photos, distributing a link, clicking likes and commenting are all sharing practices. Indeed, participant comments reflected their understandings of what they do with WeChat as sharing. This was often observed in their diary keeping as well as in the interview setting, suggesting that sharing is equivalent to online participation within the context of WeChat for many participants.

In his work, John (2013a; 2017) continues to argue that, by inviting people to share, social media platforms situate themselves as facilitators of positive social relations. Similarly, Kennedy (2014) suggests that ‘social media platforms explicitly and strategically position themselves as enabling this sharing for the purpose of community development, engagement and creativity’ (p.17). She points out that social media platforms inscribe a prosocial connotation of sharing and infuse positive implications of the functions to emphasise the connections enabled by the practices of sharing (Kennedy, 2014; 2020). As such, users are encouraged by social media platforms to socialise online and to do so by sharing.

When social media platforms create a link between sharing and sociality, a link between non-sharing and social exclusion or loss is also implicitly established. In other words, socialising is equated with sharing and thus ‘not sharing’ on a social media platform is associated with not socialising. This connection has been suggested in media reports. For example, ‘anyone not willing to share their mundane day-to-day business on a prime social media platform is a ‘murderous psychopath’’ (Bennett, 2010, cited in Kennedy, 2014, p.14), and ‘those who don’t share online are seen as unsociable or having hardly any friends’²² (Jie, 2020). However, there

22. This is my translation from Chinese to English. I discussed the validity of the translation in Chapter 4.

are contradictions between participants' statements about their practices and perceptions of sharing, and the claims from social media platforms which imply that sociality requires sharing or being present online. Many participants in this research were often reluctant to engage in and connect with others through sharing. Such 'reluctance to share' manifests itself in a number of ways, from feeling disinclined to express oneself in individual chats to being passive within WeChat groups, from rarely posting on Moments (also known as Friend Circle, and equivalent to Facebook's Newsfeed) to not commenting on or liking posts. This is also indicated in a survey from China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC, 2019), whose statistics show that WeChat users were not sharing as many individual updates as they used to and that there was a decline in personal sharing on WeChat Moments in 2019. Therefore, I argue that people are self-conscious about their sharing practices on WeChat and resist following what the platform enables and promotes; and so in place of freely sharing, we see reluctance to share. However, the reluctance is more complex than its literal meaning suggests. There are contradictory narratives and nuanced engagements that exist in relation to the practices of sharing within the context of WeChat. Thus we need to account for the different dynamics that mediate users' non-sharing and sharing practices, which are being shaped and navigated by the user, platform, and mobile phone elements of the three-part model. It is important to note that the three-part model takes a slight back seat in the main body of this chapter, but I will draw it out in the conclusion.

The first section of this chapter seeks to examine the reasons behind WeChat users' reluctance to share and their perceptions relating to non-disclosure and online connections. I suggest that the reluctance results from the audiences' scrutiny of users' sharing performances, users' privacy concerns in terms of sharing, and their changing perceptions towards sharing on WeChat. The second section will discuss the complexities of participants' reluctance to share. Drawing on their multiple and nuanced narratives of their engagements with WeChat, I argue that sharing is a socially embedded practice in the process of being continually mediated and carefully negotiated.

6.2 Reluctance to share

A significant number of participants in this research were less engaged in sharing and connecting with others on WeChat, especially within WeChat groups and in Moments. This section will explore reasons for users' reluctance to share and the role of different elements of the three-part model in mediating this reluctance.

6.2.1 Scrutinising audiences and self-censorship

Some individuals' urge to not disclose is a result of the audiences' scrutiny of their sharing performances and the consequent self-censorship throughout their sharing practices. It is noticeable that these reasons for non-disclosure were mostly given by the female participants, indicating that there may be a gendered difference in relation to users' decision-making and choices to sharing themselves (Gan, 2017; Zheng et al., 2016) and a cause for the reduction in sharing within the context of WeChat, but further consideration of this point is beyond the focus of the thesis.

Tong is a 23-year-old bank officer who lives alone in Guangzhou, China. She has been using WeChat for eight years and checks WeChat Moments every day. Yet she rarely 'likes' or comments and her latest post was six months ago. When asked what her reasons were for remaining silent with Moments, she said:

You know, they [WeChat contacts] comment that I am communicating negativity when I vent out the anger and displeasure over others. They comment that I am flaunting in front of them if I post my grades, awards, or travel photos. I'm so upset. That's not my intention of the post. What do you really want to see from my posts? I just don't share any more.

For similar reasons, Tong was also reluctant to talk to her parents via individual chats: 'they are so rigorous and harsh, they were like, do not send these links, these jokes are not funny, stop being childish. They are just lecturing me and I'm so sick of it'. It seemed that her family and WeChat friends framed WeChat as a place where the strictest standards would apply. Sharing negative feelings like anger and displeasure were seen as spreading negativity,

sharing personal achievements and travel diaries were understood as showing off, sharing links and jokes were accused of being immature. For Tong, sharing meant making herself vulnerable to scrutiny and criticism by her WeChat contacts who held differing perceptions about the shared content from her own. Her practices of sharing did not contribute to positive social relationships, yet contradictorily provoked pressure and anxieties.

This issue was also raised by Linda, a 30-year-old freelancer who moved to the UK with her husband in 2011. She thought WeChat was useful for connecting with her family in China yet felt reluctant to share within WeChat groups, especially in family groups. As she comments:

I am careful and selective about my texts as I know my mum and aunts are fastidious about wording. But they still complain that my messages [within WeChat family groups] are irrational and thoughtless. I share some fun videos, they think they are boring. I share some news, they think they are fake stories. It is hard to cater for their tastes, I don't want to have a dispute with them. I'd rather not say anything.

Linda had an audience in mind when she decided what to share within groups and self-censored the content to ensure it met the expectation of a specific group. Despite the edited content, she received criticism from the older generation within family groups in terms of the appropriateness of sharing. She thus chose to be invisible in chats out of concerns about disagreement and with the intention of avoiding conflict.

For both Tong and Linda, sharing on WeChat creates tensions as well as connections. Tensions emerge when different parties hold differing perceptions of what should be shared and in what ways. Their decisions about sharing oneself are thus affected by their WeChat contacts' reactions to their sharing performances, which confirms Goffman's (1959) suggestion that individuals' construction of identity is shaped by audiences. Reluctance to share is their active attempt at avoid giving a 'wrong' impression to their WeChat contacts, and thus at controlling performative aspects of self that the audience perceives. Thus such reluctance can be seen as a strategic form of 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959), which in turn indicates the important presence of social dimension to the choice not to share. Reluctance to share here can be understood as a way of 'lubricating social relations' (Light, 2014, p.126) to address the

problems brought by sharing. Clearly, the user element of the three-part model plays a key role in shaping some participants' reluctance to share.

Due to emerging tensions, self-censorship is commonly practised and carried out throughout the sharing process (Das and Krammer, 2013). Mia, the 26-year-old journalist in Shenzhen, who showed great reliance on WeChat and sentimental feelings for always having her mobile phone with her, expressed her concerns about people misinterpreting and twisting her posts on Moments. To clearly articulate herself, she generated a list of points to follow when sharing on WeChat:

Is it OK to share this? Is it worth the mention and attention of the public? Will people be bothered about it? Will it likely offend someone or certain groups? Who could or could not see it? Is it correctly phrased? Is there a better way to get the message through? Could it result in others misunderstanding my thoughts and causing unnecessary consequences?

Sharing is surrounded by a complex set of tacit rules. In Mia's responses was an awareness of what should be concealed and what could be revealed to her WeChat contacts. This long list of self-censoring questions was created in accordance with her assumptions of the possible responses and interpretations of her potential audience, which might decrease the likelihood of misunderstanding her shared content. Similar reactions were reflected by Wang, the 66-year-old vice chancellor of a college in western China, who showed a feeling of indispensability of WeChat in her everyday life. She self-censored content before sharing to maintain the consistency of her self-image and to avoid spamming others with uninteresting or unnecessary content. As she states, 'I often try to edit the post to make it suitable to my chancellor status and, I won't like, you know, directly share any irrelevant things with them. I select the content that might interest my WeChat friends'. This is consistent with Sleeper and others' (2013) finding that exercising control over the presentation of self and ensuring the interestingness and attractiveness of shared content are the two reasons for social media users' self-censorship.

The self-censorship that accompanied both Mia's and Wang's acts of sharing were their efforts to maintain the presentation of self-images and persuade the audience of their established settings or the 'definition of the situation' (Goffman, 1959) through which the audience could obtain a sense of what is meant to happen, what to expect, and how to behave. These participants initially imagined how others would respond to their posts in Moments and then self-censored to provide their potential audience with a contrived performance and thus to manage audience's perceptions of them. Whilst self-censorship can be 'a useful technique for 'impression management' in the face of an imagined audience' (Marwick and boyd, 2010, p.12), both Mia and Wang reported that they felt reluctant to share as their initial sense of sharing pleasure gradually disappeared through cautious content editing and meticulous crafting practices. The engagement with self-censorship dampened their enthusiasm for sharing and thus discouraged their desire to connect with others through sharing. The above cases show the role of audience in some users' choices to self-censor and share, indicating the importance of the user part of the model in this process.

6.2.2 Privacy concerns

Privacy is the other factor that contributes to people's reluctance to share on WeChat. A great number of participants showed concerns about control over access to shared content from their individual networks (which is defined in the literature review as social privacy), and thus limited what they shared as a way of managing their social privacy within the context of WeChat. For example, 30-year-old insurance agent Frank is from Italy and speaks fluent Cantonese and Mandarin. He has lived in China since 2004 and started a family in Guangzhou in 2017. WeChat has brought Frank's diverse relationship groups together, including family members, co-workers, neighbours, people from interest groups, and the staff at a hair salon. This convergence is what boyd (2002) calls 'context collapse', which refers to the situation when a user's distinct social circles are situated within a single place. She argues that this frequently happens on social media platforms and challenges how users manage the construction of self across diverse set of norms. As Frank reflected:

It is too difficult to post something that is appropriate for all WeChat friends. You need to talk about different topics, use different vocabularies, and edit and check privacy

settings. It's too troublesome! So I just don't post, I don't need to worry about if it's okay for my parents to see this or what my managers and colleagues think of me.

Frank's comment expressed an intention to perform a different version of self and convey a different impression to diverse social groups when sharing. However, the collapsed context enabled by social media platforms like WeChat brings together 'commonly distinct audiences' (Marwick and boyd, 2010, p.115) and facilitates the content and social norms from a single context seep into the boundaries of one another (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014). This thus complicates sharing and causes tensions for Frank to maintain boundaries that separate different social settings and maintain a sense of self between distinct roles for different audiences.

Similarly, a wide range of people can be found in Sue's WeChat contact list. Sue is the 54-year-old magazine editor in Shanghai who sees WeChat as intimate and for personal use only. She reflected that having disparate groups of people in her WeChat friend list created difficulties when sharing:

I do not want my colleagues, business partners or the guy down the street to see my private stuff. I don't want them to know what's happening in my life. Sometimes I think I may select some friends I'd like to have access to my posts, but I have too many contacts, it's too much work to do it. That's why I seldom post or comment. I don't care about theirs, either. It's strange, you know, although it is called 'friend circle', but it is not a circle of friends.

Sue was aware of who constituted her audience and the collapsed context in which she was sharing. She felt uncomfortable connecting with her co-workers and unfamiliar others through posting and commenting on others' posts on Moments. As a result, she withheld from sharing on Moments to mark the boundary between private and public, personal and professional, and most importantly, friends and WeChat friends. In doing so, she wanted to prevent unknown or potentially inappropriate audiences gaining access to her personal life.

Both Frank's and Sue's reluctance to share resulted from the situation when different circles of contacts are collapsed into one place, as was their attempts at managing the extent of personal information to be communicated to their WeChat friends and levels of access that others might have to themselves. Their reluctance is also a response to the increasing integration of WeChat into personal and intimate connections and WeChat's dominant position in initiating social relations, as discussed in the previous chapter. Thus, it is the collapsed context enabled by the platform and users' desire to maintain social privacy that both lead to their limited sharing practices within the context of WeChat. This is indicative of the roles both platform and user parts of the model play in informing users' reluctance to share.

While Frank and Sue found it troublesome to assign their WeChat contacts to different groups and to customise WeChat privacy settings of each post when sharing, 27-year-old Tina (who works as a HR specialist in a construction engineering company in Shanghai, China), reported that editing privacy did not really prevent others from accessing her shared content on Moments. This was also the reason behind her reluctance to share, as she rationalised it:

People may save it and share screenshots with their own networks, it may cause gossip, and this is really happening. I complained about my workplace in Moments and checked the privacy settings several times to make sure my colleagues and bosses cannot see it before sharing it. Yet, one of my colleagues knows this as she is a close friend of my schoolmates. You know, I was like... [rolling eyes] so, not sharing is the wisest choice.

As Tina experienced, she was unable to keep a specific work-related message secret from her work relations by limiting access to the post through privacy settings. This is because her shared information could be regenerated and disseminated in unexpected ways by other WeChat contacts who have access to the content. Although she was able to decide what she shared and who could view the particular shared content, she had less control over what her WeChat friends did with her posts and to whom they gave access. Tina's perception was shared by Ben, a 58-year-old civil servant in Shenzhen, China, who shared five posts on Moments in the past 10 months, two of which were links. He refrained from sharing on

Moments to control the flow of the disclosed information instead of editing privacy settings. He thought that sharing could put him in an unfavourable situation as people had little control over what information was consumed by whom and how that information was shared and reused. He referred to screenshotting and spreading his shared content to unintended audiences without his consent and knowledge.

Tina's and Ben's comments raise two interesting points. First, it is hard to keep shared content private despite the desire to do so. This is because of what Marwick and boyd (2014) call 'networked privacy', which suggests understanding the harms of privacy on social media platforms in terms of 'networks and the relationships between people' (p.1064). As such, sharing on social media requires individuals to work together to manage 'the boundaries of privacy and publicness' (Lampine et al., 2011, p.4). In the above cases, Tina and Ben showed concerns about the failure of others' collaboration in maintaining their sharing performances and keeping the shared secrets private. Such difficulties of maintaining social privacy within WeChat Moments restrained their desire to share, indicating the importance of the user element of the three-part model in the practices of not sharing. Secondly, their concerns about the ease with which content can be duplicated and distributed, as well as the potential of the sharing of content to a wider audience, all speak to the replicability and scalability (boyd, 2010) of digital information, which are seen as structural affordances of social media platforms. These technical affordances of the platform enable the broad visibility and potential publicness of sharing and may result in the insufficiency of 'privacy settings' to manage social privacy. This is indicative of the role of the platform affordances in shaping the sharing decisions some users make when engaging with WeChat Moments.

Participants' privacy concerns were not only related to the 'context collapse' and the structural affordances of the platform, but also to the disclosed information being potentially used in ways they did not intend (defined as institutional privacy in the literature review), such as the mobile phone's location tracking and the platform's data mining. For example, Han is 27 years old and has worked at the Chinese embassy in the UK for five years. Recalling the time he travelled back to China earlier in 2018, Han pointed out how uncomfortable he felt in terms of being tracked by WeChat Moments ads through his practices on and off WeChat:

I never received any ads²³ in Moments when I was in England, but different kinds of ads showed up in my news feed by the time I landed at the airport in Shanghai when checking my phone. WeChat must track my location all the time. [WeChat] collects my data that I do not voluntarily share and sells them to advertisers, not to mention the data that I voluntarily share. So I try not to post, like or comment on Moments to keep my personal information to myself.

Han was welcomed by the WeChat ads, which might be the first to know that he had set foot on his native land. Such encounter is a result of platform's data mining and mobile phone's location tracking. As I noted in Chapter 3, WeChat Moments ads are only available in mainland China and location is one of the criteria that WeChat uses for targeted advertising. The mobile nature of WeChat enables the platform to collect users' real-time locational data via mobile phone GPS, and analyse the data for service provision, targeted advertising and profit accumulation (Cabalquinto and Hutchins, 2020). Han's experience of Moments ads informed his understanding that sharing might result in the automation of platform data collection and ads targeting, and made him feel concerned about the exchange of his personal information between WeChat and the marketers it worked with. He did not expect the non-voluntarily shared data, such as his locational data, to be tracked and targeted by the platform, and assumed that his shared data would be managed in the same way as the non-voluntarily shared data. According to Nissenbaum (2009), people care most about and have expectations of the 'appropriate flow' of the personal information they disclose in a given setting. In this case, WeChat's ignoring of Han's expectations of the flow of the personal data is seen as a privacy invasion. As such, privacy concerns and intention to take ownership and ensure the desired flow of his personal information were presented as reasons for his reluctance to share. Here we can see how the platform element works with mobile device element of the three-part model to influence how Han approaches sharing.

23. WeChat introduced this feature in 2015 to let advertisers reach their customers on WeChat Moments with relevant ads.

For Han, not sharing was a mechanism of protection and his adopted strategy to regain control over privacy. However, not-sharing does not prevent him from receiving the Moments ads. According to its Privacy Policy, WeChat automatically collects users' IP addresses used to connect to the Web. This means that users' geographical locations are mapped out by the platform when they log in, even if the individuals do not volunteer to share. Thus it is the location data generated by where he is and not what he shares that produces the Moments ads. This is indicative of the importance of the platform and mobile phone elements of the three-part model in users' management of institutional privacy in terms of what data are being accessed for what purposes and by whom. More discussion about users' perceptions of privacy and WeChat's data mining will be discussed in Chapter 8.

6.2.3 Changing perceptions

Another reason for reluctance to share is changes in users' perceptions of social sharing. For some participants, their stance on sharing is moved away from public broadcasts that share everything to selective sharing which is characterised by 'reluctance'. For instance, Yang is a 21-year-old university student in Guangzhou, China, and has been using WeChat since he had his first smartphone in middle school. He has not shared anything in the past 10 months because:

I often reserve posts for special events or personal achievement, you know, I feel that these are things that I really want to post. I used to share everything about my life on Moments, it feels like one big place where everyone just tries to impress everyone else. I just followed others and did not think much when posting things. But now I am thinking whether this thing is worth sharing or meaningful for me or not.

Yang's perception towards WeChat Moments and engagement with sharing had undergone a marked transformation. Moments was no longer perceived as a place for daily trivia and mundane experiences, but rather, as a personal archive where important time nodes of his life were stored. As such, sharing on WeChat Moments includes careful selection of what is worth remembering as part of the past and thus ceases to be an everyday practice. Thus, Yang's sharing practices were oriented by how he perceived sharing and what he desired to keep a record of.

Like Yang, Ji, the 58-year-old doctor in the UK, who personalises her mobile phone in several ways, was also being selective about sharing despite the connective attempts made possible by the platform. She used to share from time to time and thought Moments was a fun way to maintain friendships. However, she refrained from sharing in Moments now because:

I don't see too much point in posting about the day-to-day events. I don't need to keep up my relationship and connect with others through these likes or comments on Moments. I don't feel closer to those people because they are sharing their lives. I find that I am not interested in what is happening in other people's lives and I don't need to connect with others through this way. I don't share unless something significant happened.

When asked further about what she meant by 'significant things', she showed her latest post – three photos of a family gathering which was shared six months ago – and commented:

I think this deserves a post. It is not easy for all our family members to get together, but most of them showed up that day. I want to memorise this, you know, very time I see it, I feel quite happy.

For her, family gathering was the occasion that was worth marking. These moments could be reminisced about and the importance could be repeated once they were shared online. As such, WeChat Moments has been used by Ji as a private sphere which is constituted by the pivotal moments of her life.

In contrast to the discussion presented in the previous sections where audience play a role in mediating some individuals' reluctance to share, the above examples imply the importance of users' perceptions of sharing in this process. Some participants consider their audience as themselves and understand WeChat Moments as a place that connects the past to the present, rather than connecting with others. Recognising the 'archival dimension of social media' (Good, 2013), these users share on WeChat to document the meaningful encounters they have experienced and to preserve these valuable records and moments for the future.

This thus results in some WeChat users' reduced sharing on WeChat Moments. Yet, differing perceptions of the archival storage of WeChat was shown in the research. Contrary to the above accounts, it is also seen as the main driving force for some users' everyday practices of sharing. These nuances and variations will be discussed further in the next section.

Ji also explicitly pointed out that her relationship with others would not be affected by not sharing on Moments. Rather than conforming to what social media platforms told her she should be doing or trying to fit into the online community through social sharing at the beginning, she recognised that the way she felt most comfortable was to not share. This point was reflected in a small number of participants' comments in both generational and regional groups. They revealed that they did not need to keep up their social relations through sharing and that sharing did not necessarily contribute to their experience of positive social relationships. So even though social media platforms promote and intensify the pro-social connotations of sharing and invite people to create and maintain positive social ties through sharing (John, 2017; Kennedy, 2020), these participants do not always respond as platforms would like. In other words, resisting what the platform promotes how it is to be used, some users act with agency in the decision-making process they go through when deciding on what to represent and how their personal information is shared. This highlights the importance of the user element of the three-part model in shaping some participants' perceptions and practices of sharing on WeChat.

6.3 Complexities of reluctance to share

However, individuals' reluctance to share is rarely absolute. In the data collected for this study, there are contradictory narratives and nuanced engagements that exist in relation to sharing. These complexities that arise around participants' sharing practices are explored below.

6.3.1 Alternative sharing

In the literature review chapter, arguments were presented outlining the idea that publicness is the default of social media and thus sharing on social media means bringing private self into public view. Yet I found that some participants chose to share within private groups which are comprised of their significant others, or share with themselves, rather than with all their

WeChat contacts on Moments. This is one of the complications of people's reluctance to share.

For example, Henry is 25 years old, received his master's degree in 2017 and works as a vet in Beijing. He rarely engaged with WeChat Moments because, as he put it, 'I prefer to share things with my friends [in a private group], I don't want to share details of my personal life with everybody'. Similarly, contradicting the comments she made earlier in relation to reluctance and privacy concerns, 54-year-old Sue who lives in Shanghai, reflected that she retained information to share in private with her close friends via individual chats and private groups, and that she did this to maintain relationships. These participants' practices of sharing with selected groups and individuals can be a practice that tends to create intimacy. This is because a sense of intimacy can be experienced and preserved by offering 'exclusive' access to personal information and the unavailability of the shared content to others (Iness, 1996; Reiman, 1976). Although social media platforms highlight the benefits of openness and transparency of an online environment for the development of intimate relationships (Miguel, 2018), and encourage users to share in public realms to maintain intimacy through their default design and interface (boyd, 2008; Young and Quan-Haase, 2013), it would appear that some participants do not always follow what the platform promotes. They can be inclined to share in closed networks and connect with more controlled audiences to encounter intimacy within the context of WeChat. Thus, in place of sharing publicly in news feeds, we see sharing privately in individual and/or in-group chats. This finding challenges the idea that social media users understand digital intimacy as what they can share and what others can see (Ito et al., 2009) and thus share in public realms with regularity to experience online intimacy (Thompson, 2008). Here we can see how some participants' considerations and perceptions of intimacy are central to their decision-making process of ways of sharing, underlining the importance of the user element in this process.

When Sue showed her Moments page to me during the interview, I observed that most of the posts were only available to herself. She explained:

I want to document my everyday life and keep those moments. It's like a diary, I have images, selfies, and meaningless trivia here. So I know what I did at that time, and

what happened to me. Sometimes I get nostalgic, I like to go back, check my timeline, and see how my life was back in the day.

Sue shared with herself on Moments and considered sharing as keeping digital diaries which can be recalled and reminisced about if desired. Her view was shared by a small number of older participants in this research. They disclosed that most of their Moments posts were shared with themselves for the purpose of constructing a personal repository that archives their everyday. This ties in with Zhao and others' (2013) assertion that users perceive and manage their sharing around 'a perceived personal value' such as reminiscence and reflection of self, as opposed to 'rendered public values' such as sharing to others to reinforce connections and maintain social bonds. As such, these participants' sharing practices on WeChat Moments were driven by their personal desire to document aspects of their everyday lives, which again highlights the role of the user element of the three-part model in this process. There is an identifiable generational difference in relation to the practice of sharing *with* oneself on WeChat. I found that older users in comparison to younger were more likely to construct WeChat Moments as a digital repository of personal stories and histories that is only available to themselves. This is in line with Sun and Zhao's (2018) finding that the older generation tends to understand digital media technologies as portals to a personal past and utilise them to document aspects of their everyday lives. This is an indication that age is a contributing factor in how people engage in sharing on WeChat.

Whilst the older participants generally decided to share with themselves, most younger participants were sought to share through alternative channels. Weibo, for example, as introduced in Chapter 3, is often referred to as the Chinese version of Twitter where users can create, discover and share content. Weibo gears toward open connections and public discussion compared with WeChat, which is relationship-focused and private. The following examples illustrate that some younger participants favoured Weibo over WeChat for sharing:

I need to carefully consider what to post on Moments. My bosses and relatives may judge me negatively if I have a stupid view or naive thought. But on Weibo, I don't think much when posting. It's a personal space where I can say what I want and be who I want, because I don't know my followers and I don't care (Clare, 30, China).

I feel Weibo is more private [than WeChat]. I seldom post on WeChat because I am much more sensitive about what I share on WeChat and who I am whereas on Weibo I am not. On Weibo, I am not censored to speak. Nobody knows who you are. On WeChat, it worries me that my shared things would lose respect or upset others (Yang, 21, China).

Both Yang's and Clare's reluctance to share on WeChat were influenced by the incorporation of WeChat into everyday personal and professional lives and the consequent and constant non-anonymous connections it enabled. They were concerned about how their WeChat friends would think negatively of them if their shared content was opposed to others' views and values and contradictorily offended others and caused upset. Their recognition of potential conflicts and consequences of their connections with others made them unwilling to engage in sharing on WeChat. Their sharing practices on Weibo were motivated by the perceived and experienced anonymity on the platform. Their desire for free self-expression without adapting performances of sharing based on the imagination of the reactions from familiar others could be achieved through the anonymous sharing within the context of Weibo. These younger participants felt less embarrassed and restrained to share feelings and thoughts on Weibo, which is mainly constituted by strangers, than on WeChat where the audience consists of familiar others. This speaks to Gan and Wang's (2015) suggestion that younger people tend to be attracted to the public micro-blogging social media platforms. This also demonstrates how users' desire to achieve anonymity and disclose openly shapes the way they share, highlighting the significance of the user part of the three-part model play in alternative sharing practices.

These participants felt their construction of self on Weibo was private, yet it was not. As previously discussed, Weibo is an open platform on which all content is visible and users' profiles and shared content are accessible and searchable for the public by default. According to the *Weibo Terms of Services*, users are required to provide identification credentials and legal names when registering an account, to share, repost and participate in online discussion. The publicly-accessed shared content as well as the 'real-name registration system' indicate that Weibo cannot facilitate true anonymity, or in other words, users cannot fully be

anonymous when sharing on Weibo. Despite the feelings of degrees of anonymity, these participants are not in a 'state with the absence of personally identifiable information' (Hogan, 2015, p.293). This echoes Kennedy's (2006) argument about the differentiation of being and feeling anonymous in the digital context. She suggests that the levels of anonymity in the digital context are diverse and relational, pointing to the need to look at the context to unlock the relationship between being and feeling and to explore the 'simultaneously public and private character of the internet' (Kenney, 2006, p.871). In the above examples, we can see that although WeChat affords more private connection than Weibo, some younger participants perceived the former to be more public than the latter. They felt more comfortable sharing on Weibo because the publicness of the platform affords them a certain degree of anonymity. Anonymity provides a sense of freedom and invisibility, allowing them to share without self-censorship, and disassociate from acquaintances and 'become uninhibited' in sharing in the digital context (Suler, 2004). Here publicness is not about broad visibility and access to the self, that is, sharing personal thoughts, feelings and performing identities to a potentially large audience. Rather, it is about feelings of constraint and vulnerability to familiar others, namely, not being able to engage in anonymous and free sharing. These participants' nuanced sharing practices across different platforms depend on the public/private architecture of social media platforms as well as their feelings about their anonymity on these platforms. This demonstrates how the user and platform elements of the three-part model mediate how people perceive anonymity and manage their sharing practices.

6.3.2 Managing the obligations of sharing

WeChat users' reluctance to share is layered because of a feeling of obligation to share. Throughout the interviews, some participants spoke of feeling almost coerced to share on WeChat under certain circumstances. Such experience was articulated by 50-year-old William, the financial officer in Beijing who showed confusion about the workings of WeChat and the mobile phone. As he reflected:

We use WeChat to send and receive work-related messages, our supervisor always asks us to reply 'received' or 'ok' to each of his message immediately [in our WeChat

work groups]. I often unlock my phone to check WeChat messages every now and then though I don't want to, you know, that's very distracting. But I need to do it.

Paying close attention to his mobile phone and sending messages to co-workers on WeChat were an integral part of William's job. It was established in the literature review that what social media users are invited to share has undergone a gradual change from 'fuzzy objects' (such as 'life/world') to 'no objects' at all (such as 'connect and share' or just 'share') (John, 2013; 2017). The notion of sharing has become vague and inclusive in a social media context and comes to represent what people do with the social media platform. Messaging, as an essential practice on social media platforms, could be seen as a form of sharing. In William's case, a need to share immediately in group chats and an expectation of a fast answer from others were shown. This is partly due to the intimacy with work and working relations as demonstrated in the previous chapter. The embeddedness of the platform in professional connections and the incorporation of WeChat in everyday life has generated 'connected presence' (Licoppe, 2004) and 'perpetual contact' (Katz and Aakhus, 2002) between professionals, and has led to expectations towards timely sharing on WeChat and users' feeling the responsibility to respond. Such expectations of constant accessibility and availability were enhanced by the mobile phone through which users access WeChat and with which users' online presence is associated (Glotz et al., 2005). Here we can see the role of the platform and mobile phone combining to shape some users like Williams' reluctant sharing practices.

Likewise, 27-year-old HR worker Tina in Shanghai was reluctant to share on WeChat due to privacy concerns and was put into a similar situation and expressed a similar reaction. As she commented, 'we are required to share news and promotions of our company products with our positive comments in WeChat Moments. I don't want to post these things every day, but I can't refuse.' Despite her reluctance, she had to make compromises and engage in forms of sharing on WeChat she would not otherwise do. Her reluctant sharing practices on WeChat were too a result of the integration of WeChat into professional relationships. Here we can see in the above cases that sharing is a necessary and unavoidable aspect of using WeChat. In other words, opting out of sharing or choosing not to have a continuous presence on

WeChat is, in certain situations, not an option. Thus, for some, sharing is a necessary condition of work: to engage with work-related connections, people must share.

While some were engaged in obliged sharing with co-workers on WeChat, others established a way to manage their sharing practices when the situation was forced. For example, 23-year-old bank officer Tong noted that she often edited her privacy settings and made work-related posts in Moments only available to her managers and colleagues when asked to share publicly. This was her approach for managing obliged sharing practices at work. Similarly, 50-year-old accountant Rachel in western China scheduled time to reply to all WeChat messages, although she was aware that her boss had high expectations of a fast answer. She commented:

I think it is up to us to determine if we want to be reached all the time. There has been a lot of times where WeChat work-related messages bothered me. I usually turn on the 'do not disturb' mode on my phone.

Rachel engaged with her mobile phone and switched it to silent mode to cope with sources of mobile interruptions. This was her way of resisting immediate and continual contact and limiting online availability. We can see from the above accounts that these professionals became conscious editors, strategically negotiating their presence on WeChat and developing patterns that worked for them in response to sharing requests from their managers. This indicates the role of the user part of the model in shaping some participants' practices of sharing. It also points to the importance of the platform and mobile phone elements of the three-part model in exerting agency over sharing: the platform allows Tong to manage sharing by editing the accessibility of work-related posts, while the mobile device enables Rachel to manage sharing by switching off WeChat push notifications.

It is also evident in this section that the feeling of obligation to share and management of the obligations towards sharing in working encounters were more relevant to participants in China than their UK counterparts. This may possibly due to the cultural understandings of the incorporation of social media in professional life. It has been suggested that social media like WeChat is a culturally accepted way to deal with work-related tasks in workplaces and is increasingly taking a dominant position at work in Chinese society (Liu et al., 2016; Song et al.,

2019). Thus, whilst UK professionals tend to use email to conduct work conversations with co-workers, Chinese professionals prefer to engage with WeChat for everyday workplace communication (Liang, 2020). This indicates that location is an important factor that contributes to users' engagement with working connections and in obliged sharing on WeChat.

6.3.3 Mediated sharing

I also observed that some users' reluctance is not fixed. Sometimes they are reluctant, sometimes they are not; sometimes they share, sometimes they do not. In the following, I will demonstrate how the elements of user, platform and mobile phone contribute to shifting perceptions and practices of sharing oneself on WeChat are made. For example, 27-year-old Han in the UK, who was reluctant to share due to privacy concerns about data mining, contradicted himself in his later responses to the sharing questions:

Han: I like reading articles from my subscribed WeChat Official Accounts. And sometimes I share these articles to others [on Moments].

Jiaxun: What kind of articles do you share?

Han: Those I can read the full text of. There is a 'share' button at the end of the article, when I read the full blog, I see that button, and I just click it.

Han was convinced by the purpose of the 'share' button placed at the bottom of the page which invited him to share what he read on WeChat Official Account to his Moments page. He spontaneously followed what platform information architecture promoted him to do without thinking much about whether or what to pass on to others. This indicates how the sharing options displayed on the platform interface guides users to carry out specific actions of sharing (van Dijck, 2013b), indicating the mediation of the platform element of the three-part model in this process.

His article-sharing practices were also influenced by the operation of his mobile phone. Given the mobile nature of the platform, the dependence on a mobile phone for sharing on WeChat relies on the device working when it is required. However, there was a struggle between Han and his mobile phone over desired practices which was played out at the level of functionality.

He commented that there was a delay in loading Moments when clicking the 'share' button of the WeChat Official Account article after he had his iPhone updated at Christmas 2017: 'I hate lag in devices, it takes a long time to respond. I am in no mood for sharing. So I just force quit the app'. His sharing practices on Moments were complicated by the discrepancies between his expectations of functionality and the actual functionality of his iPhone. The technical issues of the working of Han's phone interrupted his sharing practices and stopped him from trying to share.

Nonetheless, in the document analysis, it is found that the poor operation of Han's iPhone after the completion of the update was not purely an accident: it was deliberately slowed down by the phone's manufacturers. Apple (2018) confirmed in a statement that 'batteries in the devices became less capable of supplying peak current demands, as they aged over time. This could result in an iPhone shutting down unexpectedly to protect its electronic components'. As such, the company intentionally slows down older phones to 'prolong the life' of these devices and to make sure these devices can still be used (Apple, 2018). This means that it is the consumable batteries that largely contribute to changes in iPhone performance. However, Apple's claim is not widely accepted by the public, especially technology activists. This is because, according to a blog from Primate Labs,²⁴ 'the fix will cause users to think, 'my phone is slow so I should replace it' not, 'my phone is slow so I should replace its battery'' (Poole, 2017). Similar views on the issue of the slow-down of iPhone processors were shared by Gizmodo (2018) and 36kr (a famous tech blog in China) (2018), which suggest that this will likely feed into the 'planned obsolescence' narrative. These commentaries suggest that the revelation from Apple is proof of the company's intention to limit the life of a product to encourage the purchaser to replace it or force people to keep buying new phones. This echoes the 'conspiracy theory' from an economic report by *The New York Times* (2013) which notes that Apple artificially degrades product durability and 'tortures users with a crappy phone' to drive new sales, concerning its unique position in the global market. Thus, we can see how the development of business models and the profit-making strategies of mobile phone manufacturers like Apple inform the operation of their products

24. Primate Labs is a company which specializes in developing tools to measure desktop and mobile systems' performance.

and thus characterise users like Han's engagement of sharing practices and connections on platforms accessed through their mobile devices.

One conversation with Naomi also demonstrated the centrality of the three elements of the three-part model in mediating her sharing and non-sharing practices in relation to WeChat. Naomi is 24 years old and was born and raised in western China. She works as a nurse in a local hospital after graduating from the local college. She is a regular selfie taker and shares photos on Moments with varying frequency. It was observed that Naomi did not share any photos between January and May 2018 when we were looking through her WeChat Moments together during the interview. She explained:

On the New Year's Day, one of my WeChat friends liked my post which was shared two years ago. I get a little bit freaked out and think hmmm, no, all my old posts can be seen by others! That's creepy! I feel uncomfortable because I feel they [WeChat contacts] are always watching me. I quickly deleted all of my past photos and did not want to post at that time.

Naomi's reluctance to share was due to feelings stemming from an unexpected 'like' of an old post. She felt disturbed when her WeChat friends dug through her past and was concerned about the publicness and accessibility of her shared content remaining on Moments. Marwick (2012) states that social media platforms have 'a dual nature in which information is both consumed and produced', which creates reciprocal engagements in 'broadcasting information that is looked at by others and looking at information broadcast by others between individuals' (p.380). This means that whilst the platform provides a place where users can share and connect, it also enables users to monitor each other's online presence and sharing practices. These activities of watching one another are what scholars call 'social surveillance' (Joinson, 2008; Marwick, 2012). Thus, reluctance to share is a result of Naomi's intention to avoid such social surveillance. She refrained from sharing on Moments to manage the potential of being monitored by others and deleted the old posts to make her past selves inaccessible to other audiences who could previously access them. Clearly, it is the situated forms of social surveillance enabled by the platform that shape the way Naomi perceives sharing and her shared content.

However, Naomi restarted sharing selfies in June after she obtained a new mobile phone with enhanced camera features. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement when she commented:

I can post selfies without spending time and effort on editing my portraits. The camera of this new Huawei phone automatically ‘upgrades’ me by making my complexion look smoother, my eyes bigger and rounder,²⁵ but in a very natural way.

She seemed to engage in happy selfie-taking and sharing experiences that the new phone created for her. Her creation and display of selfies was facilitated by the functionality of her new smartphone, which afforded default beauty filter settings and photo editing features, which thus influenced the way she constructed a visual self and shared selfies on Moments. This is indicative of the importance of the mobile phone element of the three-part model in Naomi’s everyday practices of selfie-taking and sharing.

When asked if she was still worried about being watched by peers over time, Naomi replied, ‘you know what, I found that I could switch my posts to private [through privacy settings]. So I post my selfies as public, and I will change it to private after a few days. It means only I can get it’. She adjusted access to her photos after sharing and edited the privacy settings of her photos to negotiate the social surveillance. By doing so, she was able to share in ways that do not stick around permanently in the public eye. To the audience, a post hidden from public view is the same as a deleted post as it cannot be seen. Her practices of re-establishing a comfortable boundary of accessibility for herself in response to social surveillance, were enabled by the platform element of the three-part model which displays available options on the external interfaces and allows users to customise the visibility of each shared post. Here we can see that Naomi acts with agency in the decision-making process she goes through when sharing on WeChat Moments. She can have this agency because of what the combination of the mobile phone (which offers a variety of filters that cater for her needs of

25. This is done through the embedded beauty mode of Huawei mobile phones: it allows users to choose between normal mode and default beauty mode on the camera, which has a set of beauty filter settings. Users can ‘set the following attributes anywhere between 1 and 10, where 10 is the most extreme version: ‘Smooth’, ‘Enlarge eyes’, ‘Brighten eyes’, and ‘Thinner face’” (Ghosh, 2017).

selfie-taking and sharing) and the platform (which allows for editing privacy settings of shared content) enables. Thus, all three-elements of the model matter in this case.

6.4 Conclusion

Overall, this chapter contributes to the debate about sharing by nuancing understanding of sharing as a straightforward process which social media users engage in. It did this by exploring WeChat users' reluctance to share as well as the complexities of such reluctance and by arguing that the three-part model is helpful for understanding this phenomenon. In the following, I demonstrate how each element of the three-part model relates to participants' sharing and non-sharing practices on WeChat.

The user element of the three-part model plays a salient role in mediating users' sharing and non-sharing practices. It was proposed that reluctance to share was their active attempt to control performative aspects of self that scrutinising audiences perceived and a tactical way of managing the impression that users made on others. Withholding from sharing was also a strategy some participants adopted to manage their social and institutional privacy within the context of WeChat. This finding challenges Wilson and others' (2012) review of literature on social media in which they argue that users are motivated by social benefits to share personal information despite there being what they may perceive as privacy risks. Reduced sharing was a result of users' sharing practices that underwent a transformation from sharing everything to sharing selectively. For some, they did not always share in ways that platforms invited them to, despite social media platforms promoting practices of sharing and encouraging users to create and maintain positive social ties through sharing (John, 2017; Kennedy, 2020). Rather than completely avoiding sharing on WeChat, some participants tended to share privately to maintain intimacy, some shared with themselves to document their everyday lives, and others shared on alternative channels for free self-expression and a sense of anonymity. It was also recognised that some WeChat users became conscious editors of negotiating their availability and accessibility on WeChat and were able to get sharing working for themselves when the situation was forced. As such, many participants in my research were carefully thinking about and deciding on what to disclose, what to keep private, and whether and how sharing is practised within the context of WeChat. Thus, I argue that

users managed to have agency when it came to sharing on WeChat. Consequently, this discussion contributes further to arguments about sharing within the context of social media and extends the discussion to the area of agency.

The platform element of the three-part model also plays a role in mediating users' sharing and non-sharing practices. For some participants, their reluctance to share was a result of the collapsed context enabled by the platform which created difficulties for them to share themselves appropriately in a situation when many distinct social contexts were merged into one. The technical affordances of the platform also shaped some participants' understanding of visibility and publicness of the shared content and thus informed the decisions they made when engaging in sharing. It was also recognised how the private platform architecture and a lack of a certain degree of anonymity afforded by the platform kept some users away from sharing on WeChat and led to their sharing practices on alternative platforms, such as Weibo.

The importance of the mobile device element may be less obvious than the other two elements of the three-part model in relation to users' sharing and reluctance to share, yet its role cannot be overlooked, especially in relation to its workings with the platform. For example, it was noted how the mobile phone assisted the platform to track users' real-time locational data and utilised them for location-based ad targeting, which thus caused a few users' privacy concerns and influenced the way they approached sharing. It was also outlined how the mobile phone enhanced the expectation of continuous presence and timely sharing in working connections enabled by the platform, and thus resulted in some participants' reluctant sharing on WeChat.

The importance of all three parts of the model can also be seen in the empirical data discussed in this chapter. For a few, each element of the three-part model played a role in the decisions they made in terms of their 'in' and 'out' of WeChat. For example, one participant's desire to share on WeChat was discouraged due to considerations of privacy, but at the same time was facilitated by the platform interface which guides users to carry out specific actions of sharing (van Dijck, 2013b); yet sometimes such sharing practices could be interrupted due to technical issues with the mobile phone. Thus, users' sharing and non-sharing practices were not fixed because of the varying degrees of mediation by the users, platforms, and mobile devices.

One of the aims of my thesis was to explore whether there are differences in everyday WeChat uses across age groups and locations. I found that both the younger and older groups were equally thoughtful about their sharing and non-sharing practices on WeChat. In terms of engaging in alternative sharing, the older generation preferred to share with themselves, while the younger generation favoured other channels over WeChat for sharing. There was little difference between the narratives of the users in the UK and China. In comparison to the UK participants, China-based participants were more likely to engage with WeChat for everyday workplace connections and thus felt obliged to share in work-based encounters.

This chapter revealed WeChat users' reluctance to share and its complexities, highlighting the user element of the three-part model plays a dominant role in WeChat users engagement in (non-)sharing practices. The next chapter will focus on the front-end monetisation of the platform, making it clear how users' heterogeneous everyday monetary practices on WeChat are constituted through an intersection of all of the three parts of the model.

Chapter 7. Monetized Socialization

7.1 Introduction

Money historically and culturally represents sociality in China because of *hongbao*. *Hongbao* – literally red packets filled with cash – is a monetary gift that is given during Chinese Spring Festival from the older generation to younger relatives as tokens of good luck and best wishes. *Hongbao* is also a gift on special occasions, such as graduation, weddings and birthdays, which symbolizes sharing blessings and good wishes. The amount of the cash gift is dependent on the relationship between the sender and receiver and is often presented in envelopes with the giver's name and wishes on the outside. The ritualised monetary exchange is indicative of the 'socially agentic nature' (Martin, 2014) of money and its prominent position in facilitating social relationships in Chinese society.

However, digitalisation has taken over this tradition since WeChat launched money-exchanging services with WeChat Red Packet (I use capital RP Red Packet to refer to the WeChat function) and money Transfer. These services were documented in most diaries and raised in most interviews as key everyday WeChat practices in this research. Most participants' online connections occur in relation to experiences of money within the context of WeChat. Inquiring as to what individuals are actually doing when they are engaging with WeChat and how we can understand the meanings of money in respect to red packets, I found that the way people practise *hongbao* has changed on WeChat. The tradition of *hongbao* in the context of WeChat falls into four categories: gift, game, message, and payment. Each is associated with specific meanings and related to a set of different social relations.

It was acknowledged in the literature review that most research regarding the monetisation of social media platforms focuses on the back end, where individuals' online connections and experiences are commoditised for the platforms' financial gain. People's practices in relation to social media are exploited and commodified by platforms' interests (Fuchs, 2011; van Dijck, 2013a) and have become what Kennedy (2016) refers to as 'monetised assets'. However, little attention has been paid to the monetisation of sociality on the front-end of platforms. This chapter fills the gap by presenting heterogeneous practices in relation to WeChat *hongbao*,

which suggests that WeChat extends the possibilities of sociality in a monetised way. I therefore argue that WeChat Red Packet and money Transfer are ways of monetising social practices and socialising monetary transactions, which thus shape the configuration of sociality within the context of WeChat. I also argue that these everyday monetary practices within the context of WeChat are constituted through the intersection of the three elements of the three-part model: user, platform, and mobile phone.

This chapter begins by outlining the changes and continuities of money-gifting tradition within the context of WeChat. I suggest that WeChat *hongbao* is gifted in various ways for different situations without adhering to traditional rules or etiquette. The chapter then considers the playfulness of *hongbao*, proposing that money, in the form of WeChat red packets, is practised as social gaming and for personal pleasure. After that, discussion will focus on the expressive and communicative layer of WeChat *hongbao*, looking specifically at the ways in which it is involved in users' self-representations and used to construct and sustain intimate relationships. Finally, this chapter will attend to the utilitarian purpose of WeChat *hongbao*, exploring how it is appropriated as a main method of payment in everyday life.

7.2 Gifting

As discussed in Chapter 3, WeChat enables users to give digital cash to their contacts through Red Packet and money Transfer functions. Anyone can issue a red packet and customize the message on the cover to others, up to 200 yuan (£20), in a one-to-one chat, or in a group (Figure 7.1). Monetary gifts can also be exchanged electronically through WeChat Transfer function where users can transfer a specific amount of money to individuals (Figure 7.2). Transfer function is often used for amounts over 200 yuan (£20) due to the limit of WeChat Red Packet, according to my participants. Gifting *hongbao* on WeChat has become a mundane activity. Data showed that 823 million people out of an estimate of one billion WeChat users received and sent WeChat red packets between New Year's Eve (4th February) and the fifth day of the Lunar New Year (9th February) in 2019 (Tencent, 2019).²⁶ The dramatic

26. <https://tech.qq.com/a/20190210/004291.htm>. This is the most recent official data related to sending and receiving Red Packets published by the time of writing.

appropriation of digital money-exchanging services within WeChat in the past year would seem to further confirm the social character of money in Chinese communities. This section will explore the relationships between gifting physical *hongbao* and digital ones through the discussions of the digital extension of money-gifting tradition, the realms of gifting, the amount of gifting, and platform-oriented gifting practices.

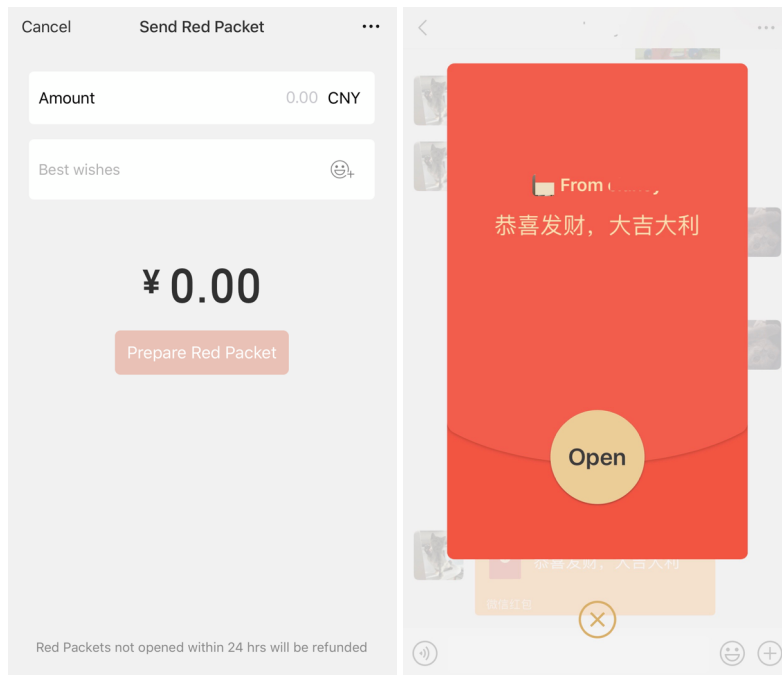


Figure 7.1 Interface for issuing and opening a Red Packet in a chat box

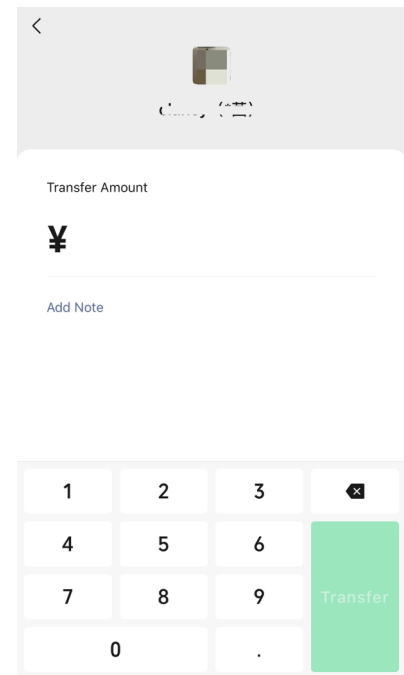


Figure 7.2 Interface for transferring money to specific WeChat contacts

Before getting into the discussion about monetary gifting practices, I will first outline sociological ideas about the relationships between money gifting and sociality. Gifts are ‘an invitation to partnership and [...] a confirmation of the donor’s sincere participation in a recipient’s tribulations and joys, despite the presence of an ulterior motive’ (Sherry, 1983, p.158). It has been argued that gift giving makes up the foundation of social exchange, generating formations of relationships (Berking, 1999, p.31) and reinforcing existing ties (Cheal, 1987; Skageby, 2010). The social significance of gifts has been highlighted by Mauss (2002) who suggests that exchanging gifts results from the intention of attaching to other people and thus gifting has a potential to build social bonds and cement intimate relationships between individuals.

Gift-giving is particularly central to Chinese culture because of *guanxi*, which 'involves the exchange of gifts, favors, and banquets' (Yang, 1994, p.6). This means that the cultivation of *guanxi* includes forms of giving and taking. It has also been argued that the structure of social relations in China rests more than in many other societies on 'fluid, person-centred social networks, rather than on fixed social institutions', so that gifts and reciprocity play a leading role in 'maintaining, reproducing and modifying interpersonal relations' (Yan, 1996, p.20). Thus, gift-giving is fundamental to the constitution of the sociality in China. As discussed earlier, money, in the form of *hongbao*, has long been used as a gift to express care, love, and appreciation in Chinese culture. It is thus recognised as common practice for people to incorporate money into their social relationships (Cheng and Han, 1994; Li, 2005; Wang and Wang, 1996).

Challenging Simmel's (2004) suggestions that money can never be an effective mediator of personal relationships and that economic activities would degrade intimacy in his book *The Philosophy of Money*, Zelizer argues that while money is indeed 'the key rational tool of the modern economic market', it also 'exists outside the sphere of the market and is profoundly influenced by cultural and social structures' (1989, p.351). In *The Purchase of Intimacy*, Zelizer (2005) further explores the involvement of economic activities in the realms of sexually tinged relationships, health caring relations and household chores, proposing that 'people often mingle economic activities with their intimate personal relations' (p. 26). Thus, money is invested both with intimate and emotional meanings and has an attribute for delivering meaningful information and the degree of intimacy (Zelizer, 2005). In other words, a gift in the form of money does not distance and estrange the donor from the recipient. Rather, intimacy and monetary transactions sustain each other.

7.2.1 Digital extension of *Hongbao*

A significant number of participants described WeChat *hongbao* as an extension of tradition where the physical significance had been converted into digital. They believed that the digital red packet channel made it easier to keep up the tradition and more convenient to show

fondness and good wishes than physical red packets. For example, Mia, the 26-year-old journalist in Shenzhen, China, who manages her everyday life through WeChat (introduced at the beginning of the thesis), thought that the advent of digital red packets was a marriage of ancient customs and modern technology, including WeChat and mobile devices.

I usually get red packets with money in it from my parents and the other elders in my family during Chinese New Year or on my birthday. But now we are doing this on WeChat. You know, it is so convenient, just a few taps of your smartphone.

Likewise, Tong, the 23-year-old bank officer in Guangzhou, China, who is reluctant to share on WeChat due to audience scrutiny, feels that digital *hongbao* simplifies matters greatly. She sent a *hongbao* to her close friend through WeChat Transfer function²⁷ when she was invited to her wedding. As she demonstrated, 'I think it [WeChat *hongbao*] is innovative and makes it easier to gift money. I just send it out via the phone on my way to the wedding venue'. WeChat red packets are used as a potential extension or adaptation of tradition and seen as a preferred and convenient method of gift giving. The shift in these participants' traditional money-gifting practices was facilitated by both the platform and mobile phone elements of the three-part model. The platform offers an alternative way through which users engage with red packets. It mirrors the Chinese custom of gifting money on special occasions and allows users to gift digital cash to their WeChat contacts through Red Packet and money Transfer functions. The mobile phone enables the money-gifting practices, which were previously and mostly practised in person, to be situated within the mobile context. It adds a certain degree of flexibility and convenience to gifting. This speaks to what Kow and others (2017) call 'placeless money', which is used to describe individuals' monetary activities that happen on the move and the way in which mobile devices improve the efficiency of the conduction of monetary exchanges.

The meaning that WeChat red packets connote is more than an extension of the *hongbao* tradition. For some participants, they are a way of establishing connections with significant others when they cannot be together and give *hongbao* in the traditional way. For example,

27. Transfer function is often used for amounts over 200 yuan (£20) due to the limit of WeChat Red Packet.

Pang is 25 years old and in his second year of his PhD in England. He is the only child of his family and describes himself as very sociable person who loves to make friends and talk with other people on WeChat. As an alternative to not being able to receive the physical *hongbao* in China, he had received digital ones from his families through WeChat Red Packet and Transfer functions during the 2018 spring festival.

This was the third Chinese New Year I spent in the UK. I haven't had a chance to gather together with my family, but I still I received a 1,000 yuan (£100) *hongbao* from my parents [through WeChat Transfer function]. I also got some big and small *hongbao* [through WeChat Red Packet] from my aunts and uncles.

WeChat *hongbao* offered an additional means for Pang to connect with his parents and relatives amid a festive atmosphere, even if they were on the other side of the world. This was also mentioned by Shelly, a 24-year-old restaurant manager who was born and raised in a small town in the UK, later dropping out of university to take over her family business. She replied that '[WeChat Red Packet] really makes me feel the warm greetings from my family even when I am in the UK, you know, geography is no longer a factor for celebrating New Year. I feel I am right next to them, and glad that they are thinking of me'. In the above cases, the gesture of gifting on WeChat shows how care and love are conveyed through money at a distance. WeChat *hongbao* is predominantly utilised as an important way of constructing a sense of togetherness and expressing intimacy, as well as compensating for physical absence during special occasions that are normally celebrated through an arrangement of physical co-location. This echoes Ju and others' (2019) finding that Chinese migrants used WeChat to 'seek communal support from family and friends, and thus to gain a sense of happiness and belonging' (p.390). As such, these UK-based participants' money-gifting practices on WeChat were mediated by their intention to maintain intimate relationships with transnational families, indicating the importance of the user element of the three-part model in this process. The platform part of the model also plays a role here by providing a place where users can prepare, send, and receive red packets, which previously mostly comprised cash transactions, when they are in a transnational context and among distant relatives. It facilitates the flow of monetary blessings and management of monetary connections across national borders

during celebratory occasions, diminishing the effectiveness of physical *hongbao* and eliminating the distance that separates members of families.

Notwithstanding, not all participants embraced the possibilities that WeChat brought to the *hongbao* tradition. Some older participants pointed out that it was the simplicity and quickness of WeChat red packets that suggested the ritualised gifting practices had become less sincere. For example, Bob, the 68-year-old retired white-collar worker in Shenzhen, China, who uses WeChat to maintain relationships with his significant others, prefers to give physical *hongbao* to his grandchildren rather than digital ones.

I think the WeChat *hongbao* more or less lack sincerity. It is so quick, just hit a few buttons on your phone. For me, it is a ritual of standing in long queues at banks to exchange old bills for crisp and new ones²⁸ and put them inside red envelopes that I buy from stationery. I enjoy giving the hand-picked red envelopes to my grandchildren individually when they come and visit me and my wife during the holidays.

Bob thought that WeChat *hongbao* lacked a sense of sincerity because it was so immediate. The effort he put into preparing for a *hongbao* for his loved ones showed his preference for traditional ways of gifting. For him, the affection and courtesy associated with the preparation process of *hongbao* could not be replaced by the digital process. Likewise, Sue, a 54-year-old magazine editor in Shanghai also opts for the traditional *hongbao*. She often gifts small *hongbao* to friends and colleagues via WeChat while reserving big physical ones for her family during Chinese New Year. She thought WeChat red packets are an improper way to gift people who she had an intimate relationship with, as she commented:

If I receive a wedding invitation from people I feel close to, I will proactively prepare a *hongbao* and a wedding card, and hand them to the couple in person. For those I am not that close with, I may not attend the wedding and just send out a WeChat *hongbao* as a gift instead.

28. Some people tend to put the crisp and new bills inside a red envelope as giving dirty or wrinkled bills is seen as bad taste during Chinese New Year.

Sue differentiated her intimate social relations from other relationships, such as colleagues and ordinary friends, and used two distinct ways to define and affirm these relationships: physical *hongbao* for intimates and WeChat for others. This reflects Zeilizer's (2005) argument that intimate relations not only incorporate economic practices, but also depend on the way they are organised.

Both Bob and Sue thought that gifting WeChat red packets embodied lower cultural value in comparison with physical ones. They differentiated digital *hongbao* from traditional ones and adopted it in a way that was deemed appropriate for their social relationships. Their perceptions of how digitalisation of *hongbao* relates to intimacy shapes whether and how they engage with monetary practices on WeChat. This is indicative of the mediation of the user part of the three-part model in some participants' understandings and practices in relation to money-gifting on WeChat. We can see that the popularity of traditional *hongbao* has not been completely replaced by digital ones, especially among the older generation. This may be because some older users tend to be reluctant to change and usually maintain the habits and manners they are used to following (Deng et al., 2014; Wang and Sun, 2016). Thus they may be less willing and more hesitant to engage with digital *hongbao*. Yet, in my research WeChat *hongbao* was still embraced by a significant number of participants who actively engage with money-gifting practices to keep up with the tradition in digital space.

7.2.2 Gifting realms

The use of WeChat red packets for establishing and maintaining social relations is not limited between generational and intimate relationships, but extended to other social relations, including affiliative relations, peer groups, and even strangers. The *hongbao* phenomenon varies from region to region in China. It is the Cantonese custom that every manager in the company should gift each employee a *hongbao* on the first workday after the Chinese New Year holiday. 50-year-old hotel owner Matt is from America and has been living in Shenzhen for over 20 years. He thinks that WeChat is a necessity for people who live in China and he is a big fan of WeChat red packets. He comments, 'as the company expands, it becomes exhausting for me to prepare and give out a large number of red envelopes to all the staff.'

Thanks to WeChat, the issue has been solved through my smartphone'. WeChat not only simplifies the gifting practices for Matt, but also enables the Cantonese custom to be expanded to other parts of China.

For example, Clare is a 30-year-old secretary at a university in Beijing, who relies on WeChat to connect with both personal and professional contacts. She often uses WeChat Red Packets with her co-workers during special occasions, as she reported, 'We [Clare, her boss and her colleagues] gift WeChat *hongbao* to each other during festivals to show good wishes. I think it's quite amusing, I can feel the cordial and friendly atmosphere'. For Clare, the involvement of WeChat red packets at work added an element of fun and loosened the rigidity of serious working relationships. She recognises the social meaning of red packets within working relations and thus as appropriate money-gifting practices befitting a specific working context. Likewise, Lou is a 29-year-old senior editor at a radio station in Beijing. She is always on WeChat so as not to miss any calls and messages from her colleagues and readers. She considers WeChat Red Packet as a preferable way to maintain working relationships:

I have never gifted and received *hongbao* from my co-workers prior to WeChat Red Packet, but my colleagues at work are doing it in our work groups on WeChat during the holidays. I just do the same. I don't want to be one of those people who just take and never give. You know, it will affect my *guanxi* with my colleagues [if I don't gift back].

Lou's money-gifting practices on WeChat resulted from her perceived obligation to return monetary gifts. Reciprocation is an integral part of the cultivation of *guanxi* (Yan, 1996; Yang, 1989) and thus is closely intertwined with relational closeness between Lou and her co-workers. Here we can see both Clare's and Lou's engagements with WeChat red packets are influenced by their intention to manage their professional networks and sustain working relationships. This is indicative of the importance of the user element of the three-part model in some participants' monetary practices on WeChat. The above examples also illustrate how some users treat WeChat *hongbao* as a ritual that is practised beyond families and engage with it in what they see as appropriate ways to maintain professional relationships. This finding of the intersections between economic transactions and working connections extends

the idea that people are constantly mixing their intimate relationships with monetary transactions (Zelizer, 2005; Smart, 2007).

However, the emergence and prevalence of monetary gifts in working relations may lead to moral problems. It is claimed that money may sully traditional values of *guanxi* exchange based on familiarity (Yang, 1994). It has been argued that, for example, subordinates can curry favour with their superiors through expensive gifts (Ke et al., 1993); powerful leaders use gifting practices to extract wealth (Bruckermann and Feuchtwang, 2016), and peer groups use 'extravagant and morally contentious forms of consumption' to manage social ties (Osburg, 2013). However, concerns regarding the layers of bureaucracy and corruption of the incorporation of WeChat *hongbao* into working relations can be dispelled under certain circumstances. This is because, as some participants noted, 'it is just for fun and we only do it on holidays. If it contains a lot of money, I will give it back' (Clare), and 'we only give a very small amount of money to each other, just a few yuan [a few pennies]' (Lou). Thus, WeChat red packets may not possess bribe-worthy characteristics due to the rare occasions on which they are exchanged and the relatively small amount contained within each *hongbao*. More discussion about the amount of WeChat red packets will be presented in the next section.

Additionally, WeChat red packets are practised between strangers. For example, 22-year-old purchasing agent Alva in the UK, who uses WeChat to manage her business, sent small WeChat red packets to her customers whom she never meets or knows little about to build and sustain lasting business relationships. Similarly, 50-year-old financial officer William in Beijing, who showed great reliance on his mobile phone, takes advantage of WeChat Red Packet as a marketing tool to get his company promoted within the different WeChat groups he was in, including interest-based ones which were full of unfamiliar others. He used WeChat *hongbao* to attract attention otherwise his marketing messages would be easily ignored or quickly lost in these groups. While Alva gifted WeChat *hongbao* to strengthen the bonds and remain linked with others, William perceived it as a stepping stone to make personal messages receive immediate attention. These participants' money-gifting practices with strangers are a result of their perceptions of the conditions under which money should be sent and for what purposes. This is consistent with Zelizer's (1989) concept of 'special money', which is used to discuss the changing social meanings of money. She argues that the meaning

of a monetary transaction can change according to the specific social context because money is 'earmarked' and valued differently by different people. The inclusion of WeChat red packets in the above cases was driven by users' different understandings of WeChat *hongbao* in different relationships and their personalisation and appropriation of it in different contexts, underling the importance of the user part of the model in this process. The finding that cash gifts can be exchanged between strangers confirms the social nature of money in China and challenges the idea that individuals are 'conservative on getting involved in financial activities with strangers' (Wu and Ma, 2017, p.2245).

7.2.3 Gifting amount

There are unspoken rules for senders to follow when deciding how much money to enclose in the traditional *hongbao*, depending on the recipients and scenarios. Generally, the closer the relationship or the more significant the event, the larger the amount of the cash gift. However, these rules do not apply to WeChat *hongbao*. Several participants were not concerned about the amount of money attached in a WeChat red packet. They believed that WeChat *hongbao* was intended to please not to impress and they were more inclined to choose meaningful numbers than big ones as the amount. Comments throughout the interviews showed that the combination 5, 2, 0 and the digit 9 were often gifted in romantic relationships. These numbers mean 'I love you' and everlasting love, respectively, due to the similar pronunciation in Chinese of both sets of phrases. Gift amounts that contained the digits 6 and 8 were also welcomed among participants. Both digits are considered auspicious in Chinese culture: 6 means that things will go smoothly, and 8 signifies 'wealth', 'fortune', and 'prosper' in Mandarin. Multiples of 6 or 8 are even better.

For example, 27-year-old Zhu, who works in a biotechnology company in Beijing and considered WeChat as an essential way to establish and maintain social relationships, often gifts small WeChat red packets to his wife. He enjoyed the monetary connections on WeChat although he admitted that the cash amount given on WeChat was less than what he would probably have spent on gifts. As he commented:

I often send a red packet which contains 52 yuan (£5) or 99 yuan (£9) to my wife. [These numbers] have meaning, they can show my love to her, make her happy, and make her feel special. [...] You know, normally, physical red envelopes gifts have to be pretty thick. If I decide to select a gift to highlight our relationship, it needs to be very expensive.

Gifts specific amounts on WeChat was a way to express Zhu's affection for his wife and to keep their romance alive. Although it was a small amount of money, it suggested how important his wife was to him and how unique and special their bond was. However, it would not make sense for Zhu to give small amounts in physical red packets because they need to be thick. Thus, the amount of money was not as significant as the meaning behind the numerical figure of the money when exchanging feelings and blessings through WeChat red packets. The idea that the monetary gift was more likely to be in lucky numbers was also raised by 29-year-old Lou in Beijing, who exchanged small WeChat red packets with her colleagues. She chose auspicious numbers as the amount to send and expected to receive a meaningful amount in return. As she commented: 'I often give 6.66 yuan (6 pence) or 8.88 yuan (8 pence) to them during Spring Festival and want to receive the same ones, you know, for good fortune'. In terms of money-gifting on WeChat, what mattered for Lou was what the amount suggests rather than what the amount is. The above examples illustrate an enthusiasm for numerology and that symbolism is the key for some participants when gifting WeChat red packets. For these participants, it is the connotations the amounts carry that matters. They highlight the social purposes of WeChat *hongbao* and the social messages conveyed through it and accordingly alters the amount they would expect in digital red packets. This shows how the user element of the three-part model shapes some people's perceptions and practices of money-gifting on WeChat.

It was also observed that the amount of money exchanged in WeChat *hongbao* was general small in a social game called 'grabbing red packets', varying from 0.10 yuan to 10 yuan (£0.01 to £1). This is a form of competition within WeChat groups where group members need to race to claim a limited number of red packets which are sent by users but distributed by the platform. Further discussion of the social gaming is explored later in this chapter but it is raised here to demonstrate the tiny monetary amounts contained in digital *hongbao*. Despite

the few pennies contained in each distributed red packet, a number of users who take part in this game embrace the social and entertainment characteristics of WeChat Red Packet, especially in groups consisting of important social ties. Therefore, it can be suggested that WeChat Red Packet functions with both a social value and a monetary value, with the former often perceptually outweighing the latter in general practice. According to Li (2015), WeChat *hongbao* is not an economic practice but a social practice.

Whereas some participants thought that the amount contained within digital *hongbao* was of little importance, others believed that the amount mattered. For instance, Tina is 27 and works as a HR specialist in Shanghai. Exchanging money through WeChat Red Packet and Transfer functions was a common practice between her and her husband. She cared about the amount of the monetary gift and wanted to be gifted a large amount of money from her husband because: 'the amount of each transaction shows how he values our relationship, especially on Valentine's Day and our wedding anniversaries', she highlighted, 'the more, the better, even a penny is love'. She expected monetary proof of love from her husband through WeChat *hongbao* on special occasions due to her understanding of the equivalence between the amount of the gift and the degree of intimacy. Similarly, Zac, the 25-year-old student in the UK, who is always on WeChat and desires to stay continually connected with his significant others, is also more concerned about the monetary value of the gift than its symbolic value. As he explained:

I feel closer to those who gift me 66.66 yuan (£6) on my birthday than those who send 6.66 yuan (less than £1) to me. I feel I am despised by those who give me 6.66 yuan, it feels like a slap in the face. I would not send such a small *hongbao* to others on their birthdays if I consider them as my close friends.

For him, the gesture of money giving, and the amount attached to the monetary gift, indicated the attention that others devoted to his birthday and the importance they attached to their relationships. Here we can see that both Tina and Zac differentiate intimate relationships from other social relations and celebratory occasions from other situations, seeking to find the right match between intimacy and monetary transfers (Zelizer, 1989). For them, money, in the form of a gift, represents signals about relationships which are capable

of expressing love and caring. As a result, they transform the degree of intimacy into numerical cash equivalents. This reflects Shurmer's (1971) suggestion that 'the value of a gift partially reflects the weight of the relationship, and the changing nature of the relationship is partially reflected in a change in the value of a gift' (cited in Sherry, 1983, p.158). In this sense, these users' understandings of the amount gifted in a red packet on WeChat is associated with what each transaction represents and how they perceive the relationship. The mediating role of the user element of the three-part model becomes clear in the above cases. Overall, it can be concluded that different contexts and different social ties generate their own amounts of *hongbao*; whether the amount matters depend on users' definitions of the situation and expectations from a relationship.

7.2.4 Platform-oriented gifting

Individuals' monetary gifting practices on WeChat are not entirely decided by individuals but sometimes influenced by the platform. WeChat users are particularly encouraged to gift money via Holiday Red Packet during the Chinese Spring festival. Unlike ordinary WeChat Red Packet, Holiday Red Packet automatically issues a specific amount of money up to 10 yuan (£1) and a corresponding caption for the giver within one-to-one chat. It allows users to change the amount (and the associated caption) upon every refresh, until they get the adequate number (and its symbolic meaning) with which they are satisfied. In other words, a three-figure number is shown as a suggested amount to put inside the *hongbao* when gifting through Holiday Red Packet. The meaningfulness of the presented numbers has also been recognised by the platform, which attaches a personalised message on the cover based on the Chinese word that these numbers sound similar to (as shown in Figure 7.3). Here it is the platform part of the three-part model that shapes what people send and receive in their gifting practices and monetary connections.

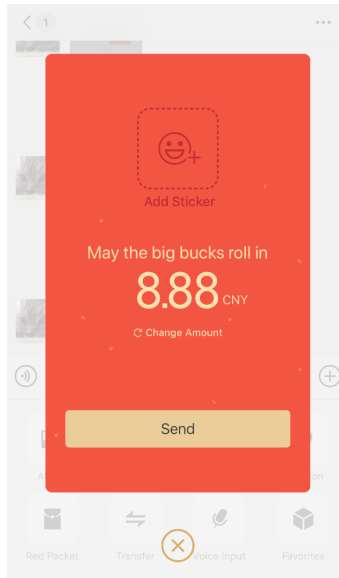


Figure 7.3 An illustration of a Holiday Red Packet which shows a suggested amount and corresponding greeting

Participants' responses to the automated *hongbao* were varied. Some were interested in the prediction that the platform made and the amount it served, as they reported:

I like it, and you don't need to think much about how much to put inside and what blessing messages to write, they are just there for you. (Lily, 60, UK)

I have received a lot of *hongbao* during the Spring Festival. This is the quickest way to do it. It is very convenient. (Luna, 51, China)

Both Lily and Luna valued the convenience of platform-guided gifting practices as the automated red packets made the gifting decision and process easier than ordinary ones, especially when being bombarded with WeChat *hongbao* during New Year. While most older participants seem to be optimistic towards platform-oriented money-giving practices, the younger participants tend to hold a more sceptical and pragmatic view on it. For example, the automated amount shown on Holiday Red Packet was pointed out by Linda, the 30-year-old freelancer in England, who reported, 'I never click the refresh button to change the amount, it is always right. WeChat seems to know how much I'd like to gift'. The workings of Holiday Red Packet were also questioned by Te, the 26-year-old technician in Shanghai, who

underestimated his usage and reliance on WeChat and contradicted his account of what he did with WeChat. As he detailed:

I was so perplexed and curious about the amount shown on the screen [5.20] when I clicked the Holiday Red Packet and planned to send on to my partner. How on earth did WeChat know this is my girlfriend, or this is someone I love. I thought the connection might be coincidental, so I tried to change the amount by clicking the refresh button. But the numbers I had were 0.99, 1.99, and 9.99.²⁹ You know, when I sent a Holiday Red Packet to my friends or colleagues, the amounts appearing on my phone were always 6.66, 8.88.³⁰

As noted above, the combination 5, 2, 0 and digit 9 indicate love and affection and are generally used within romantic relationships, while numbers like 6 and 8 are mostly practised between friends and acquaintances due to their symbolic meaning of smoothness and wealth. Te was concerned about his relationships with others being known by the platform which took decisions about how much he wanted to send to a specific contact. He felt uncomfortable with the inferred monetary connections and thus played around with the platform, attempting to prove whether the accurately suggested number was coincidental or calculated.

Both Linda's and Te's assumptions are confirmed by *Tencent Pay Privacy Policy* and *WeChat's Privacy Policy*. It is stated in these documents that WeChat collects and analyses users' log data, financial data and any other shared information through WeChat, to provide a personalised experience (Tencent, 2018; WeChat, 2020). This means that users' chat histories and transactional details are routinely tracked, including the frequency of monetary connections between the two, the amount of money one gifts to another, and the content of their conversations. Therefore, while people are gifting money to other networked humans, they also grant platform access to their personal and financial data that forms part of the gifting process. This enables WeChat to engineer users' potential money-gifting practices as

29. Digit 9 indicates everlasting love in Chinese culture. Multiples of 9 are often used in romantic relationships.

30. Digit 6 means that things will go smoothly and 8 signifies 'wealth', 'fortune', and 'prosper' in Mandarin. Multiples of 6 or 8 are even better.

well as the monetary connections they forge with each other. WeChat thus presents a tailored amount with symbolic meaning to represent the relationships between the sender and receiver, and guides users to make certain choices about how much is appropriate to gift to a specific WeChat contact through a Holiday Red Packet. This aligns with Bucher's (2013) suggestion of 'programmed sociality', which is used to understand the process of human sociality that is directed by the automated technologies. She argues that social media platforms like Facebook are not merely a 'facilitator' but a 'maker' of social relationships because they 'participate in creating, initiating, maintaining, shaping, and ordering the nature of connections between users and their networks', contrary to the idea that a relationship is something that people choose to engage in freely (Bucher, 2013, p.489). As the above discussions show, WeChat performs an active role in making gifting decisions and automating monetised socialisation.

7.3 Gaming

However, people are not just converting physical red packets to digital ones. They have incorporated them into playful interactions. 'Grabbing red packets' on WeChat was mentioned by a significant number of participants. WeChat inserts gaming mechanics in monetary connections by enabling people to give digital cash within a group, where the sender specifies the number of people who can receive it and the amount of money that is put inside a red packet, which is randomly distributed to each recipient by the platform (Figure 7.4). Neither the sender nor the receiver knows how much money has been received until the red packet is clicked on. The results of the social gaming, including the names of each recipient and the corresponding amounts, are listed in chronological order (Figure 7.5). Apart from the lottery results, choosing several red packets fewer than the number of people within the group is the other key element to ensure the gamification of *hongbao*. This means that not every group member can secure a red packet when participating in the game. They need to react fast to the notification and compete for the funds.

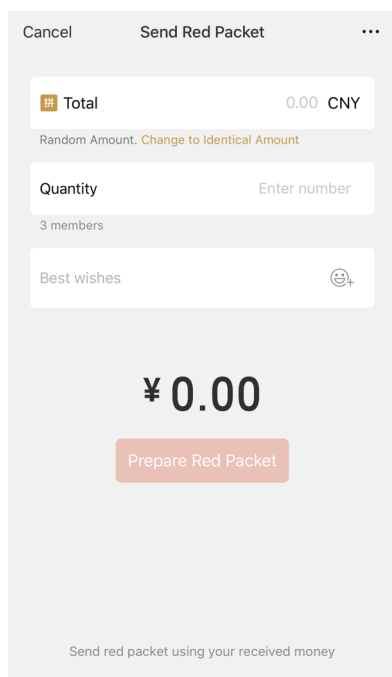


Figure 7.4 Interface for Issuing a Red Packet within a Group

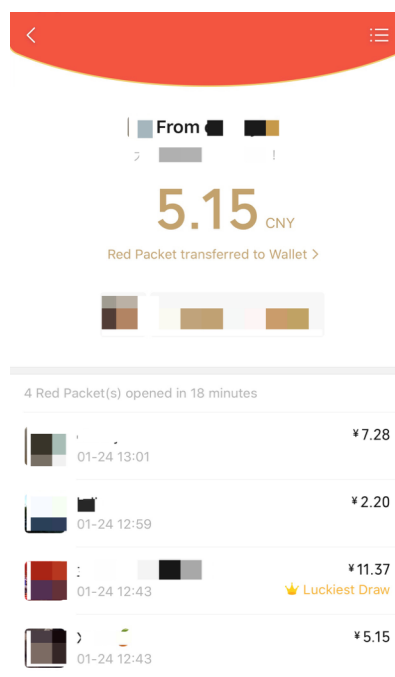


Figure 7.5 An illustration of the details of Red Packets gained by people within a WeChat group

Many participants in this research showed strong interest in racing to claim a red packet within WeChat groups before the prize money runs out. For example, 59-year-old part-time taxi driver Dan reflected that he paid close attention to and checked WeChat notifications regularly, to compete with other group members to get a share of the pie. This is because, as he commented, ‘it is a contest of speed. Money goes to the ones who spot and click on it the fastest, otherwise you will go empty-handed and receive a notification saying that – better luck next time’. However, it was observed that the amount of money Dan grabbed in each WeChat red packet was generally small, varying from 0.10 to 10 yuan (£0.01 to £1), compared with traditional *hongbao* of at least 100 yuan (£10). When asked what motivated him to compete against others to secure such a small portion, he commented, ‘I don’t care about the amount, really. My whole family are enjoying playing this game together, especially during holidays. We love to see who’s being first and post fun at each other’. This idea was shared by Zoe, a 66-year-old retired teacher at a middle school who moved with her daughter to England two years ago. Competing to win small monetary prizes was her way of connecting with her significant others: ‘I only got 0.14 yuan (1 penny) the other day, the amount of money can literally buy nothing. But we are having so much fun’. Despite the near empty red packets,

these participants enjoyed the process of exchanging red packets within WeChat groups. They considered WeChat *hongbao* as a light-hearted activity for fun and vied for red packets with others in the pursuit of social pleasure regardless of the amount of money they collected. It is the gaming mechanics incorporated into *hongbao* that enables the playfulness of WeChat red packets and thus engenders new forms of social togetherness and emotional communication, spicing up intimate relations. As such, it is the social significance and entertaining dimensions of the gaming rather than the monetary value of *hongbao* that matters for some. This speaks to Kow and others' (2017) suggestion that group WeChat red packets represent foremost a social activity and a bonding experience. I thus argue that WeChat socialises money-related practices by gamifying the tradition of gifting red packets in a digital setting.

Here we can see that these users' practices in relation to WeChat group red packets result from their desire to maintain contact with intimate others, indicating the importance of the user element of the three-part model in this process. As I discussed in Chapter 5, users' everyday practices in relation to WeChat were oriented by their desire to maintain levels of intimacy with others. The platform aspect of the model also plays a role here in the sense that it embeds the competitive and amusing characteristics in group *hongbao* and potentially shifts user attention from the economic value to how interesting the game is (Feng, 2014; Wang and Wang, 2016). This is inscribed in the design idea of WeChat *hongbao*, as Allen Zhang, the president of WeChat, pointed out in the 2019 WeChat Open PRO in Guangzhou, 'we believe not only *hongbao* should be present in the money transactions scenario, it's also supposed to facilitate emotion expression and interesting interaction'. Thus both the user part and the platform part of the model can help make sense of the participatory practices of the social game and the game-enabled monetary connections.

While sentiments around the friendly and fun nature of *hongbao* gaming were widely shared among WeChat users in both China and the UK, the older group was more drawn to the game than the younger group. This is partly due to the relative closed networks and extended leisure time the older participants experienced after retirement (Ye and Lin, 2015). Engaging in different forms of online social interactions such as 'grabbing WeChat red packets' is one of the ways they employed to draw on social support and while away their time (Wu, 2020).

As such, the social ways in which money moves between these older users through red packets foster relations between them and combat the potential social isolation they might face otherwise.

However, not all WeChat users engage in the emotional communication of this game. There are some less intimate mobilisations and practices going on around the social gaming within the group. Emotional detachment from social gaming occurs when people intentionally take advantage of the technological characteristics of *hongbao* to cheat in the game. For example, some users install apps called 'WeChat Red Packet assistant' on their mobile phones. These apps distinguish which are red packets and which are text messages by capturing the content or colour of each WeChat notification, and send reminders for WeChat *hongbao* and direct users to the individual chats and groups (Technode, 2017). Other people use plug-ins, which are capable of automatically grabbing red packets without users knowing or which enable users to grab WeChat *hongbao* without unlocking their phones (Huxiu, 2019; ifanr, 2017) to participate in the game. These are broader trends that have been noted in media coverage but were not commented on by the participants in this research.

As I noted earlier in this section, it is the WeChat algorithms that decide how a group WeChat Red Packet is shared, with the sender deciding how much to give in how many red packets. The results of the lottery, including the names of each recipient and the corresponding amounts are available to all the group members who click the red packet. The person who opens the red packet containing the largest amount is marked as having received the 'luckiest draw' among the list (as shown in Figure 7.5), implying an equation between luckiness with winning the game. Although the algorithmic allocation of the red packets adds to the fun and caters to the game lovers, the token given in hopes of good luck and happiness may result in upset and discomfort. For example, 21-year-old student Yang from Guangzhou, China, had grabbed 48 WeChat red packets by October 2018 and had never received the 'luckiest draw' among his friends (Figure 7.6). He expressed his discomfort at being classified as an unlucky man by the platform during the interview:

It is really strange. I always get less than 1 yuan (£0.01) from the *hongbao* race while my friends have more than 10 yuan (£1). I will never be the luckiest one. They [my

friends] sometimes laugh at me because of this [when we are checking the lottery results together]. I really want to break the bad luck streak while playing the game. No matter how many times I try to win I'm failing. It seems that bad luck follows me around. Why does WeChat do this to me, especially during Chinese New Year? I hate this feeling, so I just ignore the red packets within the groups.

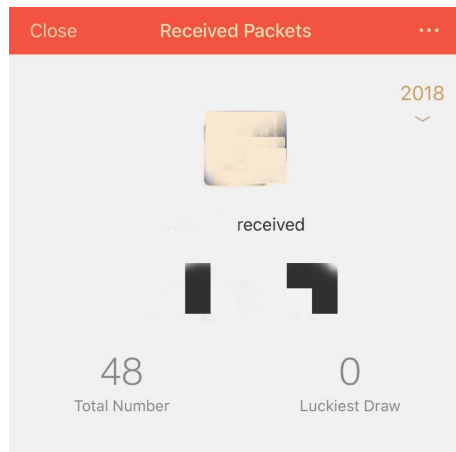


Figure 7.6 An Image of the total number of Yang's received Red Packets and the number of his 'Luckiest Draw'

Yang believed that getting the most amount of money from the game was considered to bestow good luck or a sign of fortune. Despite his attempts, he failed to obtain the desired results and experienced strokes of bad luck in contrast to his friends when participating in the game. Thus, he saw himself and was identified by others as luckless 'through the eyes of algorithms' (Bucher, 2017, p.35) during celebratory occasions. It would appear that the platform, which leads the group WeChat Red Packet distribution process, turns what is supposed to be a joyous occasion into something that Yang dreads, by implying the luckiness of some users over others. Yang's practice of opting out was his way of escaping from the platform's construction of his identity. This reflects how the platform element of the three-part model informs Yang's sense of self, shapes how he is perceived by others, and mediates his perceptions of and engagement with WeChat red packets. As Langlois (2013) suggests, social media platforms shape what we feel, what we desire, and what we would do.

Unlike Yang, who opts out of the social gaming, the algorithmic allocation of WeChat group *hongbao* stirs up Wang's interests. Wang is the 66-year-old chancellor in Lanzhou who

describes WeChat as a walking stick in everyday life and mixed up the workings of WeChat and mobile phone. She tries what she believes are the possible ways to increase the likelihood of receiving the 'luckiest draw' within WeChat groups. She comments:

Not everyone gets the same amount. It totally depends on the platform. No one wants to be the unlucky one in this competition. It is a sign of fortune in the following new year. I try to click as soon as possible to be the luckiest, but it doesn't work all the time. I find that the latecomers often get a bigger amount than me [when checking the results], so I also try that, it works, but I don't necessarily get the largest *hongbao*.

Although it is the platform part of the three-part model that randomizes the amounts that each person gets as they open the group red packets, Wang played around with the platform in different ways to try and get the largest share of pie and to prove that she would be the luckiest in the following year. She knew from her previous experience that the game was surrounded by various myths and the amount that each player received was allocated by the platform. Despite such awareness, she tried to grab sooner or later to experiment with algorithms to change the amount she might receive. Her awareness translates into digital practices that enable her to re-shape and manipulate the algorithm to match her imagination. Considering getting the most amount of group red packets as an omen, she resisted passively being labelled as lucky or luckless by the platform and instead negotiated the lottery results to get the algorithms to work for her. This is her way of developing strategies to counteract the algorithm, which indicates the possibility of individual agency in the face of algorithmic power and the importance of the user part of the three-part model in gaming practices and monetary connections.

Wang's finding that the later taker may receive the largest gift is not unjustifiable. According to an employee from the Tencent Pay architecture team,³¹ 'the amount of *hongbao* assigned to each recipient within WeChat groups is totally random and the received amount of red packet is between 0.01 and the average of remaining amount*2'³² (Figure 7.7). For example,

31. See https://blog.csdn.net/bigtree_3721/article/details/79633843 [in Chinese].

32. This is my translation from Chinese to English. I discussed the validity of the translation in Chapter 4.

the average value is £1 per red packet/person when a £10 Red Packet is to be distributed among 10 people. In this case, the amount of the first red packet is between £0.01-1*2. If the first recipient gets £2, the remaining £8 will be randomly split between the remaining nine potential participants. The value of the second red packet is between £0.01-(8/9*2), and so on. Therefore, WeChat red packets are calculated in real time rather than pre-located. This is also confirmed in a tech blog,³³ which analysed the working of the allocation of Red Packets in groups through reverse engineering. The blogger used different mathematical and computational methods and implemented WeChat *hongbao* allocation algorithms in Java and found that a random method is continually used by the platform to generate a red packet, and a judgement method is implemented to make sure that the remaining amount is legitimate for the rest of the potential recipients. From the above commentaries, we can see that what the later takers grab from the group red packets is subject to how much the early takers have received. This means that the amount that late takers receive fluctuates more than for early takers, and thus the late takers are more likely to have the ‘luckiest draw’. This explains what Wang found from the lottery results and why her chance of being the ‘luckiest’ among others is unstable.

```
public static double getRandomMoney(LeftMoneyPackage _leftMoneyPackage) {
    // remainSize 剩余的红包数量
    // remainMoney 剩余的钱
    if (_leftMoneyPackage.remainSize == 1) {
        _leftMoneyPackage.remainSize--;
        return (double) Math.round(_leftMoneyPackage.remainMoney * 100) / 100;
    }
    Random r = new Random();
    double min = 0.01; //
    double max = _leftMoneyPackage.remainMoney / _leftMoneyPackage.remainSize * 2;
    double money = r.nextDouble() * max;
    money = money > min ? 0.01 : money;
    money = Math.floor(money * 100) / 100;
    _leftMoneyPackage.remainSize--;
    _leftMoneyPackage.remainMoney -= money;
    return money;
}
```

Figure 7.7 An illustration of a created code for WeChat Red Packets (Source: <https://juejin.cn/post/6844903426673868814>, accessed 12 February 2016)³⁴

33. See <https://juejin.im/entry/6844903426673868814> [in Chinese].

34. Juejin.im is one of the biggest networks of software developers in China.

Both Yang and Wang were aware of the algorithmic intervention of the social gaming. Yet Wang (the older participant) was more engaged than Yang (the younger participant) in terms of tailoring online practices to try to generate different algorithmic outcomes and ‘play by its rules’ to gain desired results (Bucher, 2017; Witzemberger, 2018), such as gaining bigger amounts from the grabbed red packets. This finding challenges the ideas presented in existing research that the older group is less aware of different forms of algorithm-driven information (Gran et al., 2020) and engages with algorithm-oriented information less proactively than the younger group (Khorsun, 2020; Zhou, 2019).

7.4 Messaging

As introduced at the beginning of this chapter, WeChat Red Packet imitates a physical *hongbao* in appearance. Users are able to include text along with a WeChat red packet while inputting the amount – the default note appearing on the cover is ‘Best Wishes’ (Figure 7.1). The design potentially creates an experience that blends the money with messages and provides a way for users to include red packets in their construction of self. Digital *hongbao*, across a range of comments made in the interviews, was utilised as a message with monetary value in everyday life. Some highlighted its expressive dimension of love and caring, some took it as a way to show appreciation, while others explored its possibility for fun and frivolity.

Te, the 26-year-old technician in Shanghai who questions the workings of the Holiday Red Packet, thought of WeChat *hongbao* as a way of expressing love and care to his mom who is retired and lives alone in his hometown.

I barely send text messages [on WeChat] to her and always do *hongbao* instead. For instance, if she is in a bad mood, I will definitely send her a *hongbao*, putting a caption on the cover like ‘I will always stand by you, cheer up’. If she has a cold, I will do the same, like ‘please take care of yourself’. You know, there are too many examples like this to count. I want to let her know that I am concerned about her, and she can get whatever she wants with the money.

For Te, WeChat red packets with crafted captions appearing on the cover could be replacements for plain text. The pecuniary version of this message constructs an image of a caring and responsible son who sends encouraging notes and provides financial support for his mum when she feels low or unwell. These red packets carry emotional closeness and act as subsistence allowance, enabling Te to feel connected with his mum regardless of the distance and to support her living financially at the same time. Likewise, 30-year-old Italian insurance agent Frank, in Guangzhou, often messages his partner in the form of WeChat *hongbao*, as he reflects:

I am inarticulate and shy [in our relationship]. So, I just send *hongbao* [through WeChat Red Packet and Transfer functions] to her every now and then, sometimes with a personalised text on the cover, such as 'love you', sometimes just the *hongbao* but with 520 yuan inside.

Zhu showed how he utilised red packets to manage his online presence and make sense of himself as an inwardly expressive person. As a romantic gesture, WeChat *hongbao* allows him to express intimacy through the love note attached to the money and the symbolic value of the amount of money that is put inside. WeChat *hongbao* is a direct and straightforward way for him to show his affection for his partner, extensively and intimately practised in his everyday life. From the above examples, we can see that WeChat *hongbao* is used in the construction of messages and presentation of self in pursuit of other relationally meaningful practices with intimate others. Practising red packets as a way of messaging is informed by these participants' understanding of red packets as carriers of both affective information and monetary value and by their desire to sustain intimacy with loved ones. This practice is also facilitated by the platform, which potentially digitises the *hongbao* tradition and creates an experience that integrates money with messages. This puts forward the recognition of the social meaning of WeChat red packets and its involvement in the construction of the self in an everyday context.

WeChat red packets are also seen as 'thank you' messages and a way to show appreciation for some. UK-based 58-year-old doctor Ji often sent money in the form of red packets to her friends from whom she sought help, 'I don't want my friends to think that I'm selfish and just

take it for granted. So I often send a WeChat red packet as a ‘thank you’ right away’. Similarly, Henry, the 28-year-old vet in Beijing, also tokenises favours and expressed his appreciation to others using WeChat *hongbao*. When asked why he did so, he commented:

I don’t want to owe them, so sending a small amount of money... you know, we will be even. I would be such a hypocrite if I say, ‘let me know if I could be of help or I will pay you back as soon as I get a chance’. You will never know how and when you do that, so normally, people just say it.

Highlighting the importance of reciprocation in communicating one’s self-image and maintaining social relationships, both Ji and Henry chose to pay back social debts and showed gratitude towards others for their help using red packets. Their incorporation of money into self-expression is thus driven by their intention to construct a positive image of the self and avoid making a bad impression on others, indicating the importance of the user element of the three-part model in this process. These practices were also shaped by the platform part of the model which shaped users’ experience of socialisation when using the platform and altered the interactions they would expect of digital *hongbao*, such as what it is for, when and on what condition it could be sent. This thus enables users to transcend debts of favour to financial debt which can be paid off through red packets immediately.

Additionally, Henry incorporates WeChat Red Packets into his everyday life for fun and frivolity. He sent 2,315 WeChat Red Packets and had received 2,372 by November 2018 (Figure 7.8). It was noted in his diary that his communication with his intimate others consisted of a thread of WeChat red packets without personalising the captions attached to them, and without a signal word. As he explained in the interview:

I often send *hongbao* to my close friends within our group without saying anything. I am just checking in and seeing if they are okay or when I am bored. They do the same if they see my messages. And then we just end up sending and receiving Red Packet on WeChat (Figure 7.9). [...] I love this ‘*hongbao* talk’ and it is fun. It is as easy as sending a text message. But I don’t need to organise my thoughts and words, they [my friends] know what I mean.

For Henry, WeChat red packets were used for initiating a chat with his friends and responding to a real-time back and forth conversation in everyday life. Sending and receiving *hongbao* replaced texting as an exchange of greetings based on the mutual acknowledgement of the rules of the 'red packets talk' within his clique. A red packet was a representation of 'I am bored, I'd like a chat', or simply another way of saying, 'hello, you alright?' The responses he got in the form of another red packet was a message for, 'Yes let's talk or greet you'. Here WeChat red packets are a form of self-representation with monetary value and a way of messaging that 'makes the money conversational' (Brunton, 2019, p.180). It would appear that Henry's monetary conversations on WeChat are not merely concerned with passing information to others, but mainly with maintaining connections. This speaks to Miller's (2008) suggestion of 'phatic communion' which refers to the online connectedness that is 'more akin to an exchange of data than deep, substantive or meaningful communication based on mutual understanding' (p.390). Yet despite the content free nature of these WeChat red packets, they are not meaningless. This is because phatic messages 'imply the recognition, intimacy and sociability in which a strong sense of community is founded' and potentially carry more weight than the content itself suggests (Miller, 2008, p.395). This assertion helps to explain why what begins as a relatively meaningless endeavour can become something that is likely to be relationally valuable in the above example. As such, Henry's everyday exchange of non-informational monetary messages are informed by his intention of strengthening in-group intimacy and developing connections with intimate others in ways that he values, indicating the importance of the user element of the three-part model in this process. Younger participants were found to be more inclined to engage with the monetary form of phatic connection than the older participants in this research. This reflects Fu and Cook's (2020) suggestion that the main purpose of younger users' communicative acts on social media is to 'occupy a shared social presence rather than to convey actual messages' (P.10).

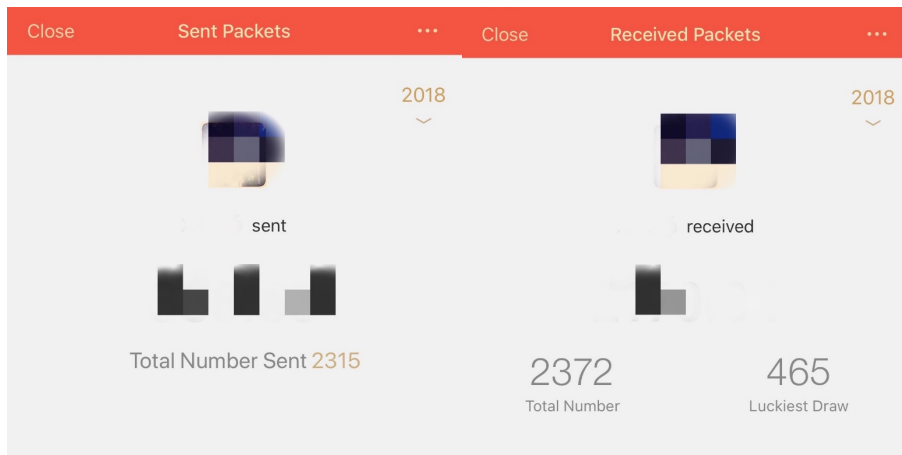


Figure 7.8 Images of the total number of Henry's sent and received Red Packets at the time of interview in 2018

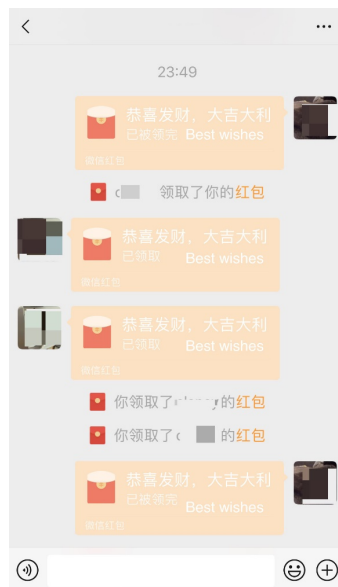


Figure 7.9 An Image of Henry's Red Packets with his friends

7.5 Payment

Digital *hongbao* has also been appropriated as a main method of payment in everyday life. Important to add here is that, although the following discussion is related less to the analysis of the socialisation than in other discussions, it is essential for the understanding of the platform mediation in users' everyday monetary practices in relation to WeChat.

The use of WeChat red packets as payments was pointed out across many interviews. For example, the 30-year-old secretary Clare in Beijing, who exchanges red packets with co-workers to show good wishes during festivals, transfers the share of the bill through WeChat Red Packet on a daily basis. As she comments:

Me and my colleagues often split the bill evenly when going out for lunch. Usually our group's meals are charged to one person's credit card; I pay the meal bill [using WeChat Red Packet] to the person afterwards. It's quite convenient. I don't need to ask for their bank accounts or carry cash and loose change around.

Similarly, 22-year-old purchasing agent Alva also collects payments through WeChat *hongbao* from her clients. She reflected:

My clients often transfer money from their WeChat accounts to my account, it is very simple. It's efficient and I don't need to switch between WeChat and the banking app. You know who has paid and understand what each transaction is for by looking at your chat histories.

Here, we can see how digital *hongbao* is used for repayment and payment. While Clare valued the convenience of making payments with red packets without exchanging bank accounts and handling bank notes and coins, Alva appreciated the simplicity of collecting payments through red packets and the efficiency of managing her business without leaving the app she was constantly on. The adoption of WeChat *hongbao* to make individual-to-individual transactions was thus driven by these participants' recognition of its instrumental and utilitarian purpose, apart from its social and emotional dynamics, and by their desire for easiness and convenience of engaging in financial transactions with social contacts. This is indicative of the importance of the user element of the three-part model in this process.

The understanding of the utilitarian purpose of WeChat *hongbao* can be linked to its expansion to mobile and online payments. As noted earlier, users can only engage with the financial services provided by WeChat, such as sending and receiving red packets, when they

link their bank account or credit card to their WeChat account. The money collected from Red Packets and money Transfer functions is automatically credited to users' WeChat Pay (Figure 7.10), also known as WeChat wallet, where users can manage their transactions, perform mobile payments, and access a range of different services. It is perhaps unsurprising to find that it is the money that is collected and saved on the platform that draws some participants to use WeChat for everyday purchases and consumption. These participants, especially those in China, mentioned that they initially used the money received from WeChat *hongbao* for small and incidental purchases, such as topping up mobile phones and hailing rides, and gradually incorporated WeChat Pay into their daily routines, including purchasing flight tickets and paying utility bills. Participants in the UK were less engaged in the financial services mentioned above compared to their China counterparts, as most were not available in the UK at the time of the interviews. This sheds light on the important of region in shaping users' everyday monetary practices in relation to WeChat.

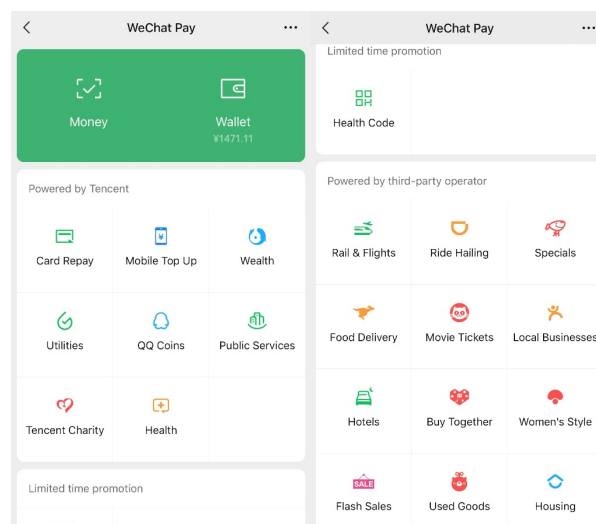


Figure 7.10 The interface of WeChat wallet

However, it is pointed out by technology activists that users' engagements with WeChat payment are an inevitable outcome of the adoption of WeChat *hongbao*. In his personal blog, media critic Yong Hu (2016) suggests that the launch of WeChat *hongbao* is a scenario that WeChat builds for the usage of the money on the platform. WeChat closely integrates online transactions with the social networks through WeChat Red Packet and (money) Transfer functions, and then diversifies the scenarios in relation to money by unlocking a wide range

of transactional services across the platform³⁵ (Hu, 2016). Similar comments are made in a tech blog which suggests that WeChat *hongbao* lays the foundation for the embedment of in-system payment services into the platform (Liang, 2014). It is concluded that WeChat *hongbao* is not only 'a successful social product', but 'a road-opener for WeChat to introduce its mobile lifestyle' (Liang, 2014). These commentaries help to explain why WeChat might have introduced WeChat *hongbao*. The platform links the money to familiar *hongbao* situations that people can associate with and facilitates users' familiarity with the incorporation of money into their experience of using the platform. This enables WeChat to make money a common element in users' everyday practices in relation to the platform and naturally facilitates users' engagement with the other monetary transactions and interactions afforded by the platform. This is indicative of the role of the platform aspect of the three-part model in shaping users' practices in relation to WeChat Pay.

What is more, the importance of mobile devices in enabling the way people make payments cannot be overlooked. WeChat *hongbao* and the practice of payment are designed with apps and mobile phones in mind. Comments across a range of interviews reflected that using WeChat for payment was in part a reaction to the conspicuousness of the mobility of WeChat in everyday life. For example, it is made tangible through displayed signage in nearly all places such shops, stores, and public transport confirming the acceptance of WeChat Pay, along with the cashier's question 'WeChat Pay or Alipay?', and with the sight of other people conducting transactions through their smartphones rather than with cash or cards. Here we can see that mobile phones enable payments to be made in everyday mobile contexts, offering an external fertile environment for the prominence of a frictionless payment solution and instrumental purpose of the app. In addition, scanning QR codes via mobile phones has become a default option for making payments in Chinese society, as discussed in Chapter 3. QR code scanning practices require the presence of the mobile phone and the activation of a mobile phone's built-in camera. This means that users rely on their mobile phones to access WeChat financial services and complete financial transactions. This is indicative of the role of the mobile phone

35. This personal blog is cited as published materials as the author would like to be recognised for the work that has gone into the blog concerning the author's expert identities. Ethical issues in relation to this were discussed in Chapter 4.

aspect of the three-part model in facilitating the existing payment practices in relation to WeChat.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter advances the debates presented in the literature review chapter regarding the back-end monetisation of social media platforms. It did so by highlighting the front-end monetisation of WeChat, looking specifically at how WeChat *hongbao* is involved in individuals' practices of gifting, gaming, messaging, and payment within the context of WeChat. For many participants, money, in the form of WeChat *hongbao* was often used as a key means for social interactions in everyday life and a way of creating and maintaining different social relationships. As a Chinese media critic comments on his blog: 'no red packets, no social' (Hu, 2016). Thus I suggest that WeChat extends the possibilities of sociality in a monetised way. These monetary relations can be seen as part of a web of relationships in which individuals are embedded in everyday life.

This chapter analysed these forms of monetary practices through the lens of a three-part model. I argue that the three-part model is helpful for understanding how people incorporate money into their everyday WeChat practices and how they engage in monetary connections within the context of WeChat. I summarise the findings related to the three parts below.

The diverse ways in which users engage with WeChat red packets were informed by the user element of the three-part model. It was noted that multiple participants gifted red packets to sustain relationships and express intimacy. They associated each red packet with different meanings, personalised the amount inside, and incorporated money in different social relations for different situations without adhering to traditional rules or etiquette. In particular, some spoke about the social game of 'grabbing red packets' and made it clear that their participation in the game was for the pursuit of social pleasure and to maintain contact with intimate others. This discussion of the playfulness of money and the gamification of WeChat *hongbao* contributes to the literature on the social meaning of money. My analysis also revealed that red packets were used in processes of construction of self-image online and adopted as a form of self-representation in an everyday context. Rather than presenting

and branding oneself to acquire monetary value (Marwick, 2013; Hearn, 2008), I found that users attached money to the presentations of themselves. This finding extends the ideas of the association between digital self-representations and money, by arguing that money is a constitutive aspect of self-representation within the context of WeChat. Overall, I suggest that people make conscious decisions about under what conditions and in what ways they engage with WeChat red packets in everyday life.

Participants' WeChat *hongbao*-related practices are also framed by the platform element of the three-part model. The platform shapes the way users experience and express intimacy by mirroring the Chinese custom of gifting money on special occasions in particular ways, and by providing opportunities for users to gift digital cash to their WeChat contacts through Red Packet and money Transfer functions. Discussion of the role that the platform performs also focused on how the platform automates monetary relations, highlighting that the platform engineers users' potential money-gifting practices as well as the monetary connections they forge with each other, and guides users' gifting decisions regarding how much is appropriate to send to a specific contact through the Holiday Red Packet. Also considered was how the platform socialises money-related practices by injecting gaming mechanics into red packets and using algorithms to decide the amounts that each person gets within WeChat groups. Recognising these issues contributes further to an understanding of how social media platforms are reframing online sociality. In addition to this, I also found that the introduction of digital *hongbao* reflects WeChat's intentions when introducing its payment system. By linking the money to familiar *hongbao* situations that people can associate with, WeChat makes money a common element in users' experiences of using the platform and promotes engagements with WeChat Pay and a wide range of transactional services across the platform.

However, the platform's role cannot be understood in isolation from the mobile devices because WeChat frames the practices of monetary exchange as something that is suited to the particular experience of mobile devices. This means that WeChat situates the *hongbao*-related gifting, gaming, messaging and payment practices within the mobile context. Such context presents the platform as handy, quick, almost instinctual, and provides the base through which users engage in monetary connections. Thus, although the mobile phone's role

in relation to users' practices with WeChat red packets may be less obvious than the other two elements of the three-part model, its importance cannot be overlooked.

In this chapter, I found that age was an important factor that contributed to the difference of users' perceptions and practices with WeChat *hongbao*. For example, the willingness to gift physical *hongbao* to intimate others was pointed out by the older participants rather than the younger ones. The younger users showed more interests in the monetary form of phatic messages than the older users in my research. Both the younger people and older people were aware of the platform intervention of their monetary practices and connections. The former were inclined to question the automated amount shown on a Holiday Red Packet when gifting to other WeChat contacts, whilst the latter tended to play around with the algorithms to generate desired outcomes or gain bigger amounts from the red packets within the social game. While sentiments around the fun and friendly nature of *hongbao* gaming were widely shared among both groups, the older group was more drawn to the game than the younger group. There was little difference between the narratives of the users in the UK and China, in terms of the users' everyday monetary practices in relation to WeChat. However, participants in the UK were less engaged with WeChat Pay and the other transactional services afforded by WeChat than their China counterparts.

While this analysis chapter has considered how each element of the three-part model shapes users' everyday monetary practices and connections within the context of WeChat, the following chapter explores users' different levels of understanding and responses to everyday data mining on WeChat. It will draw on the three-part model to understand such variations in users' perspectives, highlighting the importance of the platform and mobile phone elements in this process.

Chapter 8. Everyday Data Mining on WeChat

8.1 Introduction

In times of datafication where 'social actions are transformed into quantified data and are allowed for real-time tracking and predictive analysis' (Mayer-Schoenberger and Cukier, 2013, p.198), social media data mining is becoming 'ordinary' (Kennedy, 2016). Social media data mining refers to a diverse range of actors concerned with collecting, storing, analysing, categorising and making sense of the data that users intentionally or unwittingly disclose on social media, by means of various in-platform, free-to-use, and commercial tracking tools (Kennedy, 2016). Since WeChat has found its way into the fabric of everyday lives, users contribute data to be mined when they self-represent and share content on Moments, connect and interact with other social contacts, make online and offline payments, click advertisements, sign into other services with their personal WeChat profile, or engage with other platforms through WeChat Mini-programmes. All these practices can be transformed into data and are increasingly combined with data obtained from other sources (such as location data produced through mobile phones) and shared across digital spaces. According to WeChat's *Privacy Policy* and *Tencent Pay Privacy Policy*, users' log data (including chat histories), personal data (including profile and biological data fingerprint), transactional data, any voluntarily shared information through the platform, as well as their metadata, such as the time and duration of a talk, and the data and location of a shared photo, are automatically collected and stored on WeChat. This collected data will be shared with the affiliates of Tencent company, government and public regulatory bodies, and third party service providers that WeChat works with, according to the same document (WeChat, 2020; Tencent, 2018).

In this chapter, I explore users' perceptions of everyday data mining on WeChat. These matter because they can enable understanding of what actually happens as a result of the datafication in individuals' everyday practices in relation to WeChat. As Kennedy (2018) argues, data mining needs to be critically examined 'as it is lived, felt and experienced at the level of the everyday' (p.27). The power of digital technologies can only be understood when they are explored within their social ecology (Beer, 2017), of which the user is a part. There is a growing number of studies predominantly focused on social media data mining from a

user's perspective (see Bucher, 2017; Kennedy et al., 2015). However, conclusions made about this subject are based on dominant Western platforms, such as Facebook and Google. Other widely used platforms, such as WeChat, through which individuals' everyday lives take place, have received less attention. This chapter therefore seeks to draw upon existing debates regarding people's perceptions of social media data mining, whilst also extending these debates by questioning what impact the comprehensiveness of WeChat has on individuals' perceptions and practices. In their review of empirical research into individuals' understandings of and feelings about datafication, Kennedy and her colleagues (2020) summarise that people hold varying views about digital platforms' data mining practices and their levels of understandings and concerns of this phenomena are dependent on the context, for example, what kind of data are collected by whom, for what purpose, and with what consequences. In this chapter, such variations will be drawn out through the lens of the three-part model which incorporates the elements of user, platform, and mobile device. To understand the ways in which the platform and mobile device manifest this process, this chapter draws more upon document analysis than the other chapters have.

Most research tends to focus on the issues of privacy and surveillance as the implications and consequences of continuous and ubiquitous social media data mining. Yet this can be limiting because these discussions derive from a focus on the 'spectacular form of data mining', that is, the 'high profile and visible instances of data mining that have hit the headlines', such as the Snowden revelations (Kennedy, 2016, p.4). The major criticisms of data mining are the views of researchers rather than opinions expressed by users themselves. In this research, I explore the 'ordinary forms of data mining' (Kennedy, 2016), that is, people's everyday experience of WeChat's data mining by focusing on the language they use when articulating their views to capture their concerns. I found that a significant number of participants both explicitly and implicitly pointed out WeChat's data mining as constituting a form of privacy invasion, even though I did not frame my interview questions in this way. This makes privacy retain as an important theme among WeChat users' perceptions of data mining and echoes previous research that suggests privacy concerns are the ways users make sense of the data mining that platforms undertake. This chapter will thus contribute towards studies about users' perceptions of and attitudes towards institutional privacy, which refers to the mining

of personal data by social media platforms, commercial organisations, and authorities, as outlined in the literature review.

This chapter begins by considering users' limited awareness of and levels of understandings of WeChat's data mining, before exploring users' differing privacy concerns about and responses to datafication, including acceptance and resignation. Following on from this, I will explore users' negotiation of WeChat's everyday data mining and their adopted strategies to manage institutional privacy. Finally, this section concludes by discussing WeChat and its 'ecosystem of connectivity', pointing to future directions in which WeChat might mediate aspects of individuals' everyday life.

8.2 A Lack of Awareness?

In the data collected for this research, a number of participants showed their layered understanding of WeChat's data mining. Whilst some participants' awareness of data mining varied across distinct platforms, others' concerns about privacy and data mining were mixed, involving some uncertainties relating to online safety.

Alva, a 22-year-old purchasing agent in the UK, understood that social media platforms like Facebook and Weibo automatically mine users' disclosed personal information and share this with marketers who could freely use the data for targeted advertising. However, she thought this was not the case with WeChat and highlighted the experience of privacy on WeChat. When asked if she knew whether WeChat would access, collect and share the content she posted on WeChat, she replied:

I don't think WeChat does such things. I do not encounter any spam or promotional content in WeChat. It's an entirely private space. You will see a lot of ads on Weibo or Facebook, but not on WeChat.

Alva identified WeChat as a 'private space' because there were no spam notifications and few sponsored ads in her news feeds in comparison with other social media platforms. Such rare encounters with ads on WeChat informed her understanding of what WeChat would do to

the personal data she generated on the platform. Her perception was shared by a small number of UK participants who thought that WeChat fostered a safe and closed environment with fewer advertising messages. Their positive experience of having a private sphere on WeChat enabled them to understand that their personal data were kept private and might not be managed by other technical actors.

However, although WeChat does not present ads to some users as much as other platforms, WeChat still collects and analyses users' personal data. These users' experiences of not seeing Moments ads indicates that their location data are indeed mined by the platform. As noted in Chapter 3, Moments ads are only available to people residing in Mainland China and are not provided to overseas users. Users' location data are one of the criteria employed by WeChat to target and present personalised ads to a specific audience (group). In other words, the mobile nature of WeChat enables the platform to utilise the possibilities brought by mobile technologies, to situate users in physical space and capture their precise geographical locations, and thus to decide whether and how to serve its users through mobile advertising. It is the combination of mobile phone location tracking and platform data mining practices that result in these UK-based participants' ad-free experiences within the context of WeChat as well as their limited awareness of WeChat's data mining. This indicates that users' understanding of the platform's data mining practices are dependent on their experiences of privacy on WeChat, which are shaped by both the platform and mobile phone elements of the three-part model. Clearly, UK participants in this research held more positive attitudes towards WeChat's data mining than their China counterparts. This is possibly because the automated in-feed Moments ad services – the main factor that contributes to these participants' awareness of data mining – not being available in the UK. This shows how users' understandings of WeChat's data mining are shaped by the situational aspects of the workings of the platform, shedding light on the importance of region in these differences.

Whilst some participants' limited awareness of WeChat's data mining was due to their experiences of privacy on WeChat, others' was a result of their conflation of digital privacy and online safety. Reflected across some interviews was the tendency to think of data mining in terms of online safety and brought discussion of e-safety to privacy-related conversations. My interview with 50-year-old financial officer William in Beijing was interrupted twice by

phone calls, including a nuisance call which asked him if he had a house to let. William considered his mobile phone to be an essential tool in everyday life as it connects him with the families in his hometown and enables him to make payments. He showed an understanding of misuse of data and data breaches by talking about the Cambridge Analytica affair and the 2013 Snowden revelations. The former mainly refers to how the Cambridge Analytica company inappropriately worked with Donald Trump's election team to access and collect Facebook users' data, to target them with personalised political advertisements and predict and influence people's voting choices and preferences in the 2016 US presidential election. The latter suggests the US National Security Agency's (NSA) extensive surveillance of citizens and institutions through telecommunication companies and digital platforms, for example. When asked for his views about these news stories, William referred back to the annoying phone call from an unknown caller and linked its related threats and risks of privacy to a number of issues related to identity fraud, such as being tracked by strangers, and receiving unwanted messages from unknown others, and to malicious marketing such as spam emails and being exposed to phishing.

Likewise, Tina, the 27-year-old HR in Shanghai, who actively engages with WeChat *hongbao* and other transactional services afforded by WeChat in everyday life, assimilated discussion of privacy and data mining in relation to safety. This extract from Tina's interview highlights her perceptions:

Jiaxun: Do you know anything about what happens to the info you post on WeChat?

Tina: Yes, I know WeChat can collect information about me and sell it to marketers and advertisers.

Jiaxun: How do you find this?

Tina: That's invasion of privacy. All my bank cards are connected with my WeChat account, I don't know what I'd do if my account is hacked. I think it's secure, I have finger ID and password to verify my identity when I make payments... and mobile phone password. They can prevent others from accessing and using my WeChat wallet to rack up fraudulent charges.

Tina was aware that her personal data collected by WeChat were an important source for social and marketing analysis. Her reported privacy concerns about data mining comprised fears of being hacked by unknown others and any kind of unauthorized access to her financial information. These concerns were predictive of her online practices, such as setting different layers of passwords to prevent her from fraudulent attacks. Both William and Tina reflected their privacy concerns about what would happen to their personal information, yet they associated potential risks with online safety by suggesting how their personal data could be breached with consequences such as financial and material losses.

Users' conflation of digital privacy and online safety can be shaped by the rhetoric of the platform. It is found in the document analysis that WeChat draws on the relatedness between privacy and safety issues and tends to link these two terms together in its public discourse. For example, WeChat justifies its data mining practices in the name of 'keeping users safe from potential threats, dangers, and risks' in its *Privacy Policy*. According to its *Terms of Services*, one of the main purposes of the collection and analysis of user (meta)data, is to ensure security, to detect fraud, and to manage accounts. This suggests that data mining takes place because of WeChat's intention to uphold users' online safety. The data mining techniques are implemented for the protection of users' e-safety and the creation of a healthy online environment, according to WeChat (2018, 2020). Kitchen (2014) argues that this rhetoric is often mobilised by stakeholders who want to access people's data. He points out that the safety-related issues are 'a set of narrow and selective rationalities' that stakeholders like technical companies develop to support their adoption and roll-out of data mining. They deliberately highlight the benefits that data mining offers and avoid the potential negative consequences it may bring, such as 'dataveillance, social sorting, technocratic and corporate governance, and technological lock-ins' (Kitchin, 2014, p.127). In this sense, the online-safety framing of privacy is WeChat's attempt to create ambiguity about the meaning of data mining and normalise its data mining practices.

Moreover, WeChat links privacy with safety by leading users to manage digital privacy through a list of safety tips, for example. In its *Privacy Protection Guidelines*, WeChat claims that 'to ensure the privacy of your messages, it's important to make sure that you follow the safety tips'. These 'safety tips' provided in the official documents includes regular updates,

non-use of any non-WeChat plugins, setting different layers of WeChat passwords, and other safety-related procedures. However, these tips may not enable users to maintain institutional privacy which is related to preventing their personal data from being used in unintended ways. Rather, they may result in gaps in users' privacy considerations of data mining and create an illusion for users that they have control over their personal data. As Turow and others (2018) argue, social media platforms' interpretation of privacy-protecting practices and procedures can be misleading. For example, if users follow the tips listed in WeChat's *Privacy Protection Guidelines* to protect their privacy and trust that these measures can adequately protect their personal information, they may feel that they are well equipped to mitigate data privacy risks. This causes users to have misplaced self-confidence in controlling how their personal data is disclosed and accessed (Turow et al., 2018). This can thus distract people from the possibility of unwanted mining of their data and lead to a willingness to share personal data (Brandimarte et al., 2013), regardless of whether they feel in control or have real control (Solove, 2013). Therefore, WeChat's safety framing of privacy may function to divert people's attention away from the platform's purposes of data mining and guide people's understanding of digital privacy as relating only to online safety issues. Here we can see how the platform element of the three-part model can influence people's perceptions of social media data mining and management of digital privacy within the context of WeChat.

8.3 Acceptable Trade-off or Digital Resignation?

Many participants explicitly or implicitly pointed out that they had no privacy within the context of WeChat. For example, this was articulated by 58-year-old doctor Ji in the UK, who observed that, 'tech companies like WeChat always store your chat logs and sell your data, they do not even ask for your permission. Nothing is private'. Another participant, 28-year-old ex-serviceman Richard in western China, also stated that 'every piece of information we put online will be spread around or sold to the highest bidder. We probably don't even know when this is happening'. These participants' acknowledgement of the inevitability of the publicness of personal data were related to the platform's collection and reuse of their data without consent and being informed. In the literature review, arguments were presented outlining the idea that people have expectations about the appropriate flow of their shared content in the digital context; ignoring these expectations can be seen as an invasion of their

rights to privacy (Nissenbaum, 2009). As such, users' maintenance of privacy includes the consideration of expectations and consensus. In this sense, the platform's gathering and sharing of data did not meet these participants' expectations of the flow of personal information and could thus be understood as a violation of their institutional privacy.

Yet despite the awareness, a few participants showed a lack of concern about WeChat's data mining and considered it to be an acceptable trade-off. This is evidenced in Jane's perceptions of the ads appearing in her WeChat Moments. Jane is a 54-year-old officer of a state-owned enterprise in Guangzhou who uses WeChat for online shopping. She notes the benefits of WeChat's data mining practices:

Jane: I saw the DFS [duty free shops] ads in my Moments when I was landing at the airport. That's what I need, you know. I just clicked it, bought some stuff [on the DFS WeChat Mini-programmes], made payments [on WeChat] and collected it at the airport. I can also get a discount, it is like a bonus for me. I may not have it offline.

Jiaxun: Do you know why or how this advertisement came to be?

Jane: I know WeChat tracks my location and recommends relevant products that may be of interest to me. Sometimes I'm worried, it invades my privacy. But I think this is ok, otherwise you could not get the discount.

Jiaxun: Do you mean you are fine with WeChat's tracking and collecting your personal data?

Jane: Yes, location data is fine and it is good for me.

Jane was not particularly concerned about WeChat's collection of her whereabouts because the location-based advertising benefited her through the personalised shopping information as well as small incentive rewards. Thus, she has knowingly given up her personal information to WeChat and engaged with the customised advertising messages suggested by it. This raises two interesting points. First, this is consistent with Furini's (2014) suggestion that users' privacy concerns relating to location-aware services can be alleviated if they provide benefits to users. Jane's unease about the privacy concerns does not take away her demand for the perceived benefits brought by WeChat. Second, this finding reflects Kennedy and others' (2015) argument that people weigh up the potential risks and benefits of platform's data

practices to decide whether to 'trade off' the risks for perceived advantages. In this example, Jane made decisions about which matters more for her: the expectation of privacy or the desire for the benefit. She accepted WeChat's data mining as a trade-off because she recognised the value of data mining in specific contexts and saw more benefits and fewer risks in enjoying certain services provided by WeChat.

Here we can see Jane's perspectives on WeChat's data mining are informed by the locational relevance of ads appearing in her news feed. As previously alluded to, the mobility of WeChat enables the platform to track users' physical places and routes in real time from their mobile devices. By gathering location data, the platform is enabled to 'capture the information about the device's surrounding space' (Firth, 2017, p.537) and generate place-specific shopping information (and coupons) to targeted users. This indicates how the platform works with the mobile phone to guide some participants like Jane's responses to and practices with the data driven content.

However, Draper and Turow (2019) argue that people do not really accept the trade off, rather they have no choice but to engage in it. They use the term 'digital resignation' to refer to the situation when people 'desire to control the information digital entities have about them but feel unable to do so' (p.1824). They argue that users' digital resignation is a rational response to the 'uneven power relationships between companies and users' (Draper and Turow, 2019, p.1824). This was what several participants reflected upon during the interviews. For example, Ji, a 58-year-old doctor in the UK, who expressed her unease about WeChat's data mining, found it difficult to manage her institutional privacy within the context of WeChat. She commented: 'I don't know what to do, I guess we have to agree to what WeChat does to our personal data if we want to continue using it'. Similarly, 30-year-old Clare, who works as a secretary in Beijing, also commented that she would like to engage with WeChat with a certain degree of privacy but were at a disadvantage in the ability to navigate and control what WeChat would do to her generated data online. She also explicitly pointed out the important functional role of WeChat in managing her everyday life and underscored the social and economic costs of opting out of WeChat, by highlighting, 'WeChat is so important to me. Not on WeChat is not an option for me'. This idea was discussed in Chapter 5 where I highlighted how some participants considered WeChat to be 'a necessary and unavoidable

part of the existence' (Deuze, 2012, p.xi) and had a feeling of indispensability about WeChat in their everyday lives. Here we can see some participants expressed their feelings of futility to avoid WeChat's unwanted data mining and had no alternative but to engage with the platform. This is especially the case with WeChat, precisely because it is entrenched and embedded in individuals' everyday lives. Users' sense of digital resignation is thus cultivated by the platform and enhanced by the comprehensiveness and everydayness of the platform.

However, such resignation is not only facilitated by the platform but by the mobile phone. Ben, the 58-year-old government official of the Bureau of Agriculture, states that 'everyone is naked' in the digital context because 'what we do online is entirely public', referring to his experience of advertisements appearing across digital platforms as soon as he shows some interest in particular online content. He highlights that:

WeChat genuinely knows where I am. I never voluntarily share my location and turn the Location Services switch to Off. But I always see some local ads in my Moments, but I don't like it and never click it. Obviously, I am still being tracked and there is nothing we can do [to protect our privacy].

Ben wanted to control the location data that his mobile phone collected about him but struggled to see how he might have an active role in keeping his location data private in the digital context. His assumption of WeChat's inevitable location tracking is confirmed in WeChat's Privacy Policy. It is stated in the document that WeChat automatically collects users' IP addresses from which they connect to the Web (WeChat, 2020). In other words, users' geographical locations are known to the platform when they log in. This means switching off location access for WeChat does not prevent the platform from knowing where users are located. Thus, with the help of the built-in positioning technology of mobile phones, WeChat automatically pinpoints users' real-time whereabouts, even if they do not volunteer to share. As such, it is the tasks that the platform and mobile phone perform in terms of geographical location tracking and ads targeting that result in Ben's sense of resignation. This finding also challenges Jung's (2017) suggestion of the positive relationship between perceived ad relevance and ad effectiveness. Rather than decreasing the evasion of the ads and weakening users' privacy anxieties for location-sharing (Jung, 2017), locational ads in WeChat Moments

instead stir up Ben's privacy concerns about the ebbing personal control and rising corporate power of disclosure of location data.

However, users' resignation about platform data mining may fuel platforms' assumptions that users are willing to trade their personal data for services, as Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg claimed in an announcement, 'privacy is no longer a social norm' (Johnson, 2010). A similar statement was expressed in founder and CEO of Baidu Robin Li's comments in relation to Chinese users' attitudes towards privacy at a panel discussion at the 2018 China Development Forum:

I think Chinese people are more open or less sensitive about the privacy issue than other problems. If they are able to trade privacy for convenience and efficiency, they're willing to do that in a lot of cases³⁶.

His statement was reported in media coverage – such as *'The disturbing comment about privacy from Robin Li,'* by People's Daily (the largest newspaper group in China), *'Are we sensitive about privacy?'* by 36kr (one of China's most famous tech blogs), and *'Chinese web users 'not interested in privacy', claims Baidu head'* by The Times – and became one of the biggest Weibo trending topics in March 2018. Netizens reacted strongly to this in comments by firmly rejecting Li's claim, by saying that 'I am not willing'; by criticising his words as 'shameless', 'cheeky' and 'despicable'; and by expressing a sense of helplessness in terms of data mining. Similar to the findings of this research, these Internet users were not willingly consenting to digital platforms' data mining and felt resigned to the inevitability of undesirable data mining. As such, the resignation towards platforms' data mining results from a perception that privacy violations are unavoidable rather than the desire to trade data for benefits (Turow et al., 2015).

Yet the sense of resignation does not suggest 'a complete abdication of efforts' to guard oneself from the platform's data mining (Draper and Turow, 2019). It is found in this research

36. This is my translation from Chinese to English. I discussed the validity of the translation in Chapter 4.

that some participants sought to regain control of the management of their personal data. For example, Sue, a 54-year-old editor in Shanghai, states that 'it might be useful to not share any sensitive information and only share things that you feel ok to be seen by WeChat. It might be pointless in terms of the bigger context, but at least have a try though'. Thirty-year-old secretary Clare in Beijing also proposes that 'I often tell myself that I need to be very careful about what I post online and what information I don't want WeChat to get hold of. So WeChat may not know that much about me'. These participants attempted to limit the information they shared on WeChat and negotiated the appropriate boundaries of what data can be captured by WeChat and what should be kept to themselves to maintain a sense of control in a place where institutional privacy protection felt tenuous and limited. This aligns with Xie and colleagues' (2018) and Selwyn and Pangrazio's (2018) suggestion that people do engage in the practices of managing their digital privacy, despite the feeling of resignation and the awareness of the futility of their efforts at negotiation. Here we can see the importance of the user element of the three-part model in users' responses to WeChat's data mining and management of institutional privacy. I will talk more about users' negotiation of WeChat's data mining in the following section.

8.4 Negotiating WeChat's Data Mining

Participants in this research not only showed their levels of understanding of WeChat's data mining; they also shared several strategies they adopted to protect their institutional privacy and demonstrated their attempts to negotiate WeChat's data mining.

Understanding that WeChat collected users' online practices and connections and shared with third parties for financial gain, 26-year-old journalist Mia, who manages her everyday life on WeChat, participated in the platform with the awareness that she has no privacy. Yet she believed that she could avoid the negative consequences of data mining through her own efforts. Not sharing and using specific apps to prevent tracking were her ways of fending off WeChat's data mining. As she reflected:

I think we have a choice about whether or not to share information about ourselves; we need to control things when we feel they are out of control. We can also download

or pay for some apps that can help and prevent us from being tracked and thus protect our privacy.

Similarly, Grace, a 20-year-old student in Beijing, was opposed to the platform collecting comprehensive data about herself but at the same time felt responsible for the spread of this data. She stated, 'I try not to use WeChat that often. I make sure I switch between different platforms instead of using WeChat Mini-programmes, you know, having a bit here and a bit there. So I can have some privacy, WeChat won't know everything about what I do or what I like'. To resist the platform gathering data on all aspects of her everyday life, Grace engaged with alternative digital platforms to cater for her daily needs instead and shared distinct dimensions of herself to different digital platforms. By being selective about what she does on which platform, she thought she could prevent WeChat from following her everyday traces and archiving her personal preferences. This tactic speaks to Highmore's (2006) argument that individuals are 'refusing a logic-of-application [by] replacing it with a logic-of-alteration' (p.119).

Important to add here is that both Mia and Grace thought they could manage their institutional privacy within the context of WeChat and considered themselves to be responsible for it, despite that the mentioned privacy invasions were related to the platform. They believed that they could mitigate the risks of data mining by moderating their everyday practices with WeChat and thus deciding on the data that the platform mined. This shows how users' own perceptions can inform how they respond to and negotiate WeChat's data mining.

However, these participants' understanding of self-responsibility for managing privacy in the digital context is also mobilised by the platform element of the three-part model. WeChat explicitly highlights individuals' obligations for their privacy in its *Privacy Policy*. For example, it is stated that WeChat only uses personal data that is 'voluntarily provided by individuals' and users need to consider the appropriateness of their shared content and to hold themselves accountable for it (WeChat, 2020). This semantic emphasis implicates the user in all data that the platform processes and sells. The platform also shifts responsibility to individuals by downplaying its practices of data mining and highlighting the personal data

usage of third parties. The *Tencent Privacy Policy* claims: ‘please be careful about what you share and communicate through WeChat. Your shared information may be separately captured, copied, or stored by, or remain public through, other users or third parties’. In addition, WeChat tries to shift responsibility for privacy protection of personal information onto individuals by indicating its powerlessness in the wider context of Internet security, in *WeChat Payment Agreement*: ‘the transmission of information via the Internet is not completely secure. Although we will implement and maintain reasonable measures to protect your personal information, we cannot guarantee the security of the information transmitted to our services [WeChat Pay]; therefore, we do not assume any responsibility for any transmission of your information which you do at your own risk’. Such rhetoric may enable some users to arrive at different understandings about the extent of individual responsibility for digital privacy. For example, it may misinform and reinforce some participants like Mia’s and Grace’s perceptions of the individuals’ responsibility around digital privacy and data mining once they seek guidance from these official documents, although they mentioned that they had not read the full terms and conditions and privacy policies of WeChat in the interview.

However, WeChat’s emphasis on self-responsibility in terms of managing privacy in the age of datafication is problematic. This is partly due to the platform’s mining of personal data and sharing with different technical actors, and partly because of mobile phone’s location tracking and transmission to the platform, as both demonstrated in the interviews and observed in the document analysis. It is the location data generated by where users are and not what they do that produces the WeChat Moments ads, for example. In this sense, managing digital privacy requires collaborative efforts of both the platform and mobile phone which are involved in the disclosure of users’ personal information, to maintain appropriate boundaries (Lampinen et al., 2011) and consistency with users’ expectations of the flow of personal information (Nissenbaum, 2009). As a result, users’ individual control over institutional privacy is impossible. People have little control over how their personal information is obtained, managed, processed, and shared by and to any other entities in the digital context (Cutillo et al., 2011). In other words, users are at a disadvantage in their ability to navigate how they are perceived by technical others and to what extent they can manage their privacy

on WeChat. Thus, shifting responsibility to individuals obscures the fact that ensuring their own privacy is not something that an individual can control.

Another participant, Te, who is 26 and works as technical staff in a pharmaceutical company in Shanghai, found data mining troubling because nothing can be kept private on WeChat. When asked if there were any intrusive things that WeChat did to him, he replied:

I would say the wrong targeted advertising appearing on my Moments. I think WeChat must misunderstand my ability of consumption, I am just a wage-earner, but I keep receiving high-end products, such as Hermes [Figure 8.1]. That's beyond what I can afford. I am not sure how this recommendation thing works. But why do WeChat algorithms think I need that? Doesn't WeChat read my payment history?

Te questioned the accuracy of the personalised advertising he encountered on Moments and criticised the workings of algorithms for generating a mismatch between his wealth (a wage-earner) and demand (luxury items). He felt uncomfortable with how he was seen by algorithms as it conflicted with how he saw and felt about himself. He did not know how WeChat algorithms worked but assumed that they performed precise calculations and presented customised ads based on the analysis of his financial data. We can see that Te holds contradictory views on WeChat's data mining: he opposes the intrusive data-driven system yet expects it to be relevant and generate a precise prediction of personal interests (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020). Yet this does not mean that Te desires to be tracked by WeChat or that the outcome of relevance overrides his concerns about data mining. Rather, it indicates the way he thinks about what WeChat algorithms do and how they ought to function. This is what Bucher (2017) calls the 'algorithmic imaginary', which refers to the way in which social media users 'imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible' (p.31).



Figure 8.1 An illustration of WeChat's Moments ads appearing on Te's news feed

Finding the workings of WeChat algorithms troubling, Te actively tries to influence and experiments with algorithms to shape algorithmic outcomes (Davis and Cambre, 2017; Wang, 2020). He reflected in the interview that he kept clicking the 'not interested' button which is displayed next to an ad's text or images (Figure 3.6) to inform the platform about his lack of interest in luxury brands ads and to prevent them from reappearing in his WeChat Moments. By doing this, he thought he was able to let the platform understand his personal preferences, thus influencing the circumstances in which the targeted ads are produced and making algorithmic predictions work in a way he expected. This finding is consistent with Bucher's (2017) suggestion that social media users strategically update and restructure their disclosed personal information to be 'better recognised and distributed by the platform's news feed algorithm' (p.37). Here we can see that Te was becoming reflexively aware of algorithms and negotiating the interfaces for the desired curation of his newsfeed. This is indicative of the user element of the three-part model in mediating the way users perceive and approach algorithm-oriented content on WeChat.

However, Te's practices of managing his encounters with ads in Moments seemed to be of little avail. He reported that, 'I still receive the same type of ads after taking these actions, that's so frustrated'. The *Tencent privacy policy* might help to explain why this is the case. It

is claimed in the document that ads are the main source of the company’s revenue, users may receive less personalised and more generalised ads if they choose to manage their interests (Tencent, 2020). In this case, Te’s attempts at tailoring the ads to his own likes and dislikes might be in vain. In other words, the more he clicks the ‘not interested’ button, the more he receives irrelevant ads. This suggests that the visibility of advertising messages in Moments is beyond what the users can manage but is instead determined by what the platform promotes. The appearance of Moments ads is not only about what people do but also about who they are friends with. In its introduction to the advertising system page,³⁷ WeChat (2020) claims that WeChat Moments ads are spread and circulated through the social networks that users establish on WeChat. As WeChat demonstrated in its illustration (Figure 8.2), if a user ignores or does not interact with the ad shown in their WeChat Moments feed, the rate for their WeChat friends’ encounters with this ad is 20%. If a user chooses to interact with the ad, clicking on the detailed information, liking or commenting on the ad, for example, the percentage chance of this ad appearing in others’ news feeds reaches 95%. This means that what sponsored content users see in their Moments news feeds is dependent on what their friends interact with. As such, Te’s reception of luxury advertising messages is largely due to his WeChat contacts’ engagements with them.

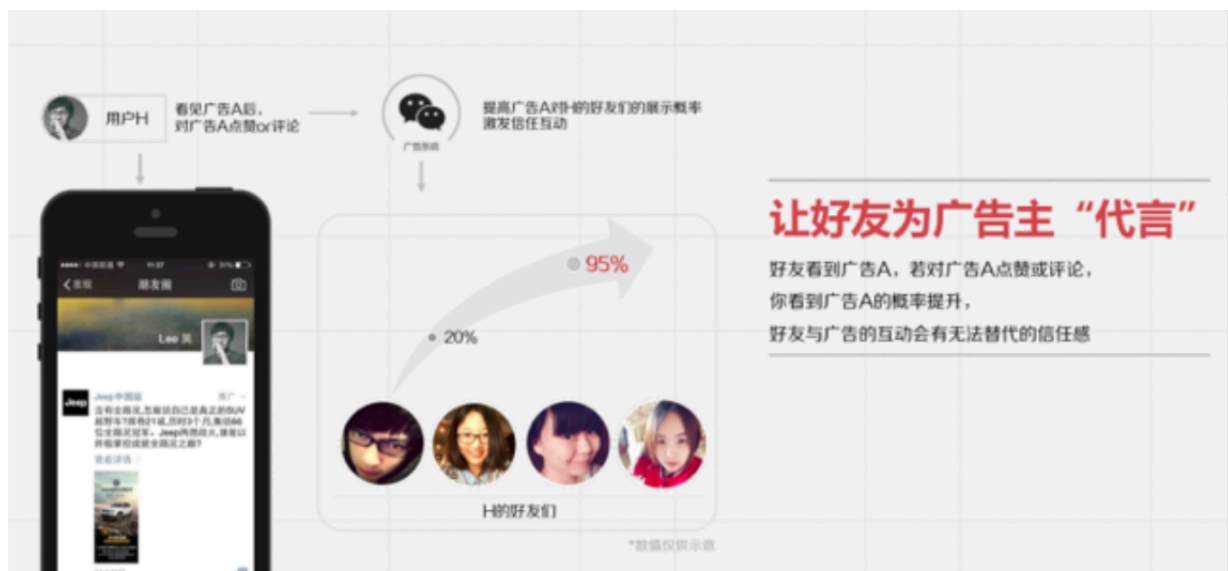


Figure 8.2 An illustration of the circulation of WeChat Moments ads

37. See <https://ad.weixin.qq.com>

Due to the ineffectiveness of managing the content he encounters on his news feed, Te then intentionally chose to decrease the frequency of his engagements with Moments so that he would not be bothered by the offensive algorithmic outcomes produced by the platform. This approach is what Witzemberger (2018) refers to as an 'avoidance tactic'. By limiting his access to Moments, Te could avoid both similar encounters and being negatively affected by the platform. This again indicates the importance of the user element of the three-part model in mediating the way users like Te deal with the frustration of their engagement with WeChat when confronted with an unfavourable situation.

Here we can see younger participants were more active in managing institutional privacy and negotiating WeChat's data mining practices when compared with the older participants in this research. This is consistent with Zhou's (2019) finding that younger adults are more likely to work against platform interventions on their everyday usage of social media platforms than older adults. This might be because younger generations, who generally adopt WeChat earlier than the older generations (Qiu and Li, 2016), are more familiar with the technical operations of the platform and thus are more confident in engaging with the platform (Liu, 2018; Xie et al., 2018) in response to WeChat's data mining. Thus, age is an important factor that shapes how users contend with WeChat's data mining.

8.5 WeChat and its 'Ecosystem of Connectivity'

WeChat not only retrieves users' chat histories, preferences and interests, transactional data, and other information shared on the platform, as introduced in the beginning of this chapter; it also amasses personal information and tracks user movements across different platforms. For example, WeChat ties its functionality to many platforms across the Internet through its application programming interfaces (APIs) that enable users to 'share' content with their WeChat contacts directly from external platforms, and adds a 'register with WeChat account' button, which gives people the option of logging in to other platforms through their WeChat accounts. This allows WeChat to extract the data that individuals leave on external websites or apps as they engage with them through WeChat. As such, all the data collected on these external platforms can be automatically routed back to WeChat. This is what is known as

platformisation concerning primarily a platform's extension into the Web and pulling back the web data into the platform (Helmond, 2015).

In addition to this, WeChat offers a set of application programming interfaces APIs, software development kits (SDKs), developer libraries, and documentation – which are important mechanisms to 'communicate, interact, and interoperate with the platform' (Tiwana, 2014, p.6) – to developers and businesses, and invites them to build and run their apps on WeChat through Mini-programmes. As such, users are able to access other external platforms within WeChat rather than being redirected to the websites or apps of these service providers, as introduced in Chapter 3. WeChat also integrates the functionalities of WeChat into Mini-programmes, such as tying the social and payment functions of WeChat into the Mini-programmes. For example, people can share Mini-programmes in the form of links to WeChat contacts and make payments directly through the WeChat Pay button available on the Mini-programmes. Here WeChat Mini-programmes can be seen as what Tiwana (2014) conceptualizes as 'a platform within a platform' (p.264). As 'nested platforms' rather than stand-alone platforms (Tiwana, 2014), Mini-programmes are written in WeChat's proprietary coding languages and comply with platform guidelines and rules, and can only exist and operate within the context of WeChat. According to Plantin and de Seta, (2019), Mini-programmes allow third-party developers to build their websites and apps on top of WeChat while 'confining them to the WeChat environment' (p.261). This means that the operation of Mini-programmes is coordinated and governed by WeChat, and that WeChat maintains control over the data that are accessed and generated by these Mini-programmes.

Unlike other platforms such as Facebook, which enacts its programmability to enable third parties to build their services on the platforms and to 'integrate their websites and apps with Facebook data and functionality' (Helmond, 2015, p.4), WeChat enables its programmability in a relatively closed environment. In other words, rather than 'decentralizing data mining and recentralizing data processing within the platform' (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013, p.1361), WeChat interconnects with other digital platforms and mobile applications by enclosing increasing amounts of personal information and social interactions inside the platform. This is what I call WeChat-ification which entails the extension of WeChat into external digital

spaces and its power to make external platforms' or apps' data either become part of WeChat or become WeChat-ready (to build on Helmond's (2015) notion of being 'platform-ready').

WeChat also automatically collects data transmitted by the mobile phone. As I have noted before, users' geo-locational data are increasingly collected and combined with their personal data shared on/through WeChat. The mobile nature of WeChat also allows for the platform's collection and transmission of users' biometric data through users' engagement with mobile phones. For example, WeChat captures users' biometric information, including fingerprint data and face ID, which are used to verify their identities when making payments by mobile phone, according to the *Tencent Pay Privacy Policy*.

In addition to this, people's everyday practices in relation to WeChat in situations like chatting, shopping, payments, and commuting, are attached with their real names due to the implementation of real-name policy. According to a set of regulations announced by the Cyberspace Administration of China³⁸ (2017), Internet companies and service providers are responsible for requesting and verifying real names for the purpose of protecting users from defamation and cyberbullying and eliminating the spread of rumours and spamming. These policies suggest that users are required to register with their real names and disclose their authentic identities online. Within the context of WeChat, the platform demands that people use their mobile phone numbers to register an account in response to the rules of implementation of real-name registration in China. This is because citizens in China can only apply for a phone number and get a sim card activated with valid ID or other identity documents issued by the authorities. As a result, a mobile phone number can to a large extent confirm a real name and the real person behind the digits. Registering a WeChat account with a mobile phone number is equivalent to the verification of an individual's real ID. By doing this, WeChat can implement the real-name system across the platform. This means all the data that WeChat collects from individuals within the context of WeChat takes a non-anonymous form.

38. See http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-11/07/content_5129723.htm [in Chinese]

We can see that a staggering volume of data can be collected by WeChat. Document analysis reveals that this data can be assembled and aggregated to create comprehensive databases of personal information by WeChat to construct ‘user profiling’, according to *WeChat Pay Privacy Policy* and *Tencent Pay Privacy Policy*. The reason for the construction of unique profiles for each individual user is not explicit in WeChat’s official documents. However, I assume that the profiling data can be used for WeChat Pay Score (Figure 8.3), an opt-in credit scoring system that was tested in cities across Guangzhou, Beijing and Shanghai in 2018 and launched in other parts of China in summer 2020. It integrates and mobilises the data users leave online and scores users based on their engagements with WeChat financial services. It is designed to give each individual a personal numerical ranking which is used to evaluate and rank users’ ‘creditability’ and ‘trustworthiness’. The higher the score, the higher the credit value. These constructed scores are used to determine whether users could be provided with certain access to special goods, offers, or services. For example, those who have solid credit records can enjoy privileges, including ‘use first and pay later’ or deposit-waivers. There is no transparent information available about how the scores are calculated and analysed. However, it is clear that WeChat has started to experiment with users’ social media data³⁹ to build an algorithmic model that can be used to measure creditworthiness through constant monitoring and evaluation of users’ economic activities in relation to WeChat.

39. This is also shown in the financial companies Affirm in the US and Lodex in Australia which tend to analyse social media profiles to evaluate the likelihood of receiving or repaying a loan (see Redrup, 2017; Reisinger, 2015).

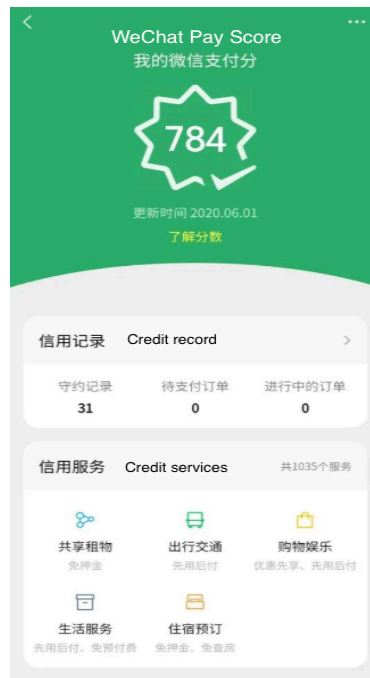


Figure 8.3 An illustration of the interface of WeChat Pay Score

The lack of information about WeChat Pay Score raises a question about the extent to which WeChat Pay Score collaborates with the government and feeds into the state-sponsored Social Credit System (SCS). This mechanism is like WeChat Pay Score and involves a big data-driven social rating system developed by the Chinese authorities. The SCS is used to track and profile each individual and rates citizens based on a range of criteria with legal and social consequences. It is claimed in ‘Planning Outline for the Construction of Social Credit System’⁴⁰ document that the SCS is designed to ‘promote the traditional value of integrity’, cultivate mutual trust, and bring about ‘a stable state of social harmony’ in Chinese society⁴¹ (State Council, 2014). The system is also aimed at policing ‘dishonest’ behaviours, which includes food safety, business fraud, high-level corruption, and ‘malicious arrears’ of individual behaviours, such as ‘fleeing bank debts or evasion of taxes’ (Wang, 2017). All citizens, corporations and the Chinese government itself (including national, provincial and municipal level) are subject to the SCS. In a range of documents regarding the implementation of the SCS, it is shown that the system consists of a ‘black list’ and a ‘red list’ that support corresponding punishment and reward mechanisms. For example, people with high credit

40. See http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-06/27/content_8913.htm[in Chinese]

41. This is my translation from Chinese to English. I discussed the validity of the translation in Chapter 4.

ratings are assigned to the 'red list' and 'may receive rewards such as less waiting time at hospitals and governmental agencies, discounts at hotels, and a greater likelihood of receiving employment offers' (Ma, 2019), while people with low credit scores are allocated to the 'black list' who may be seen as 'untrustworthy' and thus have restricted access to air and high-speed rail tickets (Wang, 2019). It was claimed that the SCS would be put into effect by the end of 2020, yet there is currently no national scoring system for individuals and the system still remains largely in development at the time of writing.

There is no hard evidence of the link between the SCS and what WeChat shares in terms of WeChat's scoring system. Yet, it is reasonably assumed that WeChat Pay Score (WPS) is designed to serve the implementation of the SCS for two reasons. One, WeChat's parent company Tencent was one of the private actors selected by People's Bank of China to begin the 'preparatory work' for the establishment of a formal credit reporting system in 2015 (State Council, 2015). According to official news,⁴² the initiative of this measurement was to foster the development of a personal credit rating system. It is highlighted that cultivating social credit agencies is an important measure to implement a series of guidelines and policies of the State Council on promoting the construction of the SCS (State Council, 2015). In other words, the development of WPS could be seen as Tencent's attempt to contribute to the implementation of SCS and is of significance to the standardisation and establishment of a unified credit score system at a national level. Secondly, WeChat is required to share its collected data, including 'user profiling' data, which is assumed to form the basis of WeChat Pay Score, with the government, according to the Cybersecurity Law and the regulations enacted by the Cyberspace Administration of China. As shown in WeChat's *Privacy Policy* and Tencent's *Privacy Policy*, the platform explicitly points out that it will share the collected data with 'government, public, regulatory, judicial and law enforcement bodies or authorities' who have a legal basis and valid jurisdiction to request the data. This means that WPS managed by WeChat would probably become the source for data extraction for SCS, operated by the authorities. Additionally, 'social networking and Internet activities' is one of the 30 specific criteria that are regularly assessed by the SCS, according to the Planning Outline for the

42. See http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-01/05/content_2800381.htm [in Chinese]

Construction of SCS (State Council, 2014). This suggests the diverse forms of datasets on individuals that WeChat collects and stores may be shared with the government.

Although the above issues in relation to WeChat Pay Score were not raised by the participants interviewed in this research, they are of concern to tech activists, both within China and globally. For example, it is argued that social media platforms' data-driven ranking and rating systems can result in private companies essentially acting as 'spy agencies' for the authorities (Chong, 2019; Creemers, 2018). In his personal blog, media critic Long (2018) portrays social media scoring systems as omnipresent mass surveillance systems and suggests that social media platforms have the potential to become important tools for governance and social control⁴³. This means that WPS may be a way for stakeholders to effectively monitor and evaluate citizens in a centralised and formalised manner. As the social media rating system plays a part in enabling access to certain services and information, and leading to the possibility of the provision of economic or social perks under certain circumstances, it is argued that the rating has the potential to 'create new forms of social inequality and restrict the freedom of individuals' (Wong and Dobson, 2019, p.228). In other words, the system can result in a situation in which certain groups of people may be excluded from the economic benefits of the data-driven score, such as offers and discounts. This may lead to what Bol and others (2020) call 'societal vulnerability', which refers to the 'creation of new divisions or inequalities in the society' that results from data mining and algorithms (p.1999). These issues of surveillance and inequality can be particularly concerning within the context of WeChat because of the 'infrastructurealisation of the platform'. According to Plantin and De Seta (2019), WeChat exhibits properties that are usually associated with information infrastructure and attains levels of usage, scale, ubiquity and criticality in everyday life that characterize infrastructure. WeChat's configuration as infrastructure results in its thorough embeddedness in everyday life. This would confer more power on the authority which may regulate citizens' everyday practices and experiences (Wong and Dobson, 2019), and enable the platform to reproduce and reinforce social inequality – it thus impacts on some users' everyday lives in disproportionate and negative ways.

43. This personal blog is cited as published materials as the author would like to be recognised for the work that has gone into the blog concerning the author's expert identities. Ethical issues in relation to this were discussed in Chapter 4.

As we can see, the potential implications of the WeChat Pay Score point to future directions of how WeChat might mediate aspects of individuals' everyday lives. Such mediation ties in closely with the platform element of the three-part model. The data users leave behind through their everyday practices with WeChat enables the platform to have the potential to assemble into a digital self, serving to configure representational profiles and generate exclusive personal numerical ranking for users. The calculated and crafted score can be seen as an algorithmic way of 'seeing' (Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Bucher, 2018) who users are seen to be, who they see themselves to be, and how they are assigned resources. This thus indicates how the platform algorithms are an essential element that contribute to the construction of identity, managing what users can access, and thus guiding what they do with the platform. The mobile device part of the model plays a role in this process. The mobile nature of WeChat enables it to capture data such as location and biometric data from users' mobile devices, as mentioned above. This allows WeChat to create comprehensive databases of individuals and to conduct continuous rating of its users while they are on the move. Thus, it would be interesting for future research to map how WeChat Pay Score develops and to explore users' perspectives on this system as user awareness grows or as the consequences of such systems become more visible.

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to contribute to the understanding of users' nuanced views towards social media platforms' data mining. It recognised privacy as an important issue in users' perceptions of datafication and explored the variations in users' views on and responses to WeChat's everyday data mining through the three-part model. This chapter has emphasised the platform and mobile phone elements of the three-part model more than previous chapters.

The differing levels of understanding and privacy concerns about WeChat's data mining in everyday life were shaped by the platform and its interconnectedness with the mobile phone. It was noted that the mobile phone's location tracking and the platform's data mining practices result in people's ambivalent feelings about WeChat's location-based services.

Whilst these services motivated a few participants to recognise the benefits of data mining and interact with locational advertising messages, they discouraged some participants' engagement with the platform and strengthened the privacy concerns about the ebbing personal control over the flow of personal data. This discussion contributes further to the literature on locative media and locational privacy. Consideration was given to some participants' ad-free experiences and their failure to recognise that their online practices generated data and were accessed and transferred within the context of WeChat, arguing that such an experience of privacy on the platform was also a result of WeChat's collection of their real-time geographical locations from mobile phones. The platform also worked with mobile phones to collect comprehensive databases of users and to construct unique user profiles which were assumed to be used for generating exclusive personal WeChat Pay Scores for everyone who opted in. I assumed that WeChat Pay Score formed part of the national Social Credit Score system and might point to future directions for ways in which WeChat might mediate aspects of individuals' everyday lives. Therefore I argue that WeChat Pay Score warrants further investigation if academia is to continue developing its ideas regarding the implications of social media in everyday life.

Users' perceptions of data mining and management of digital privacy were also mobilised by the platform element of the three-part model. It was proposed that the platform drew on the relationality of online safety and digital privacy to create ambiguity about the meaning of data mining and justify its data mining practices. Doing this would divert users' attention from the possibility of unwanted mining of personal data and guide their understanding of digital privacy as relating only to online safety issues. It was also recognised how the platform has highlighted the sense of self-responsibility in terms of managing privacy in the age of datafication in its public discourse, noting the problematics of such rhetoric and its potential in enabling users to arrive at different understandings of the extent of individual responsibility for digital privacy. Several participants reflected an inability to reject WeChat's unwanted data mining, noting that they had no choice but to be on the platform. This feeling of resignation was cultivated by the platform, and is especially the case with a platform as embedded and integral to everyday life as WeChat. This finding contributes to discussions on digital resignation, as it relates to users' wanting control of the personal data that social media platforms have about them but feeling like they cannot have it.

However, social media users are not 'passive victims' of WeChat power. This chapter has demonstrated how the user element of the three-part model plays an essential role in shaping users' perceptions of WeChat's everyday data mining. A number of users reported that they had adopted tactics to negotiate data mining, including using specific apps to prevent data tracking, engaging with alternative digital platforms to cater for the daily needs, playing around with algorithms to shape algorithmic outcomes, and avoiding engaging with certain WeChat services. Limiting the information they voluntarily shared and managing the appropriate boundaries of privacy and publicness were other techniques employed, despite the feeling of resignation. Although some of these applied tactics may not have had the desired effect in certain circumstances, users' attempts to manipulate the situation and influence the circumstances in which their personal data were captured and processed, and their subsequent practices to guard themselves from data mining and maintain a sense of control of privacy in place, indicate that users showed careful consideration of WeChat's data mining and 'wanted to exercise agency in relation to their data' (Kennedy et al., 2020, p.24). As such, this discussion reinforces the argument that there is some room for user agency in the age of datafication.

One of the aims of my thesis was to explore whether there are differences in everyday WeChat uses across age groups and locations. Both younger and older participants were equally aware of WeChat's data mining and concerned about their institutional privacy. However, the engagements for managing institutional privacy and negotiating the platform's data mining practices were more clearly seen in the younger group. As such, age was an important variable that contributed to users' different responses to WeChat's data mining in their everyday lives. In comparison with their China counterparts, participants in the UK held more positive attitudes towards WeChat's data mining, especially in terms of ad targeting. Thus, location is another factor that can impact on WeChat users' levels of understanding of data mining.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

Highlighting the all-inclusive characteristics of WeChat and its embeddedness in everyday life, this thesis has explored what is the role of the 'three- part model' (made up of user, platform and mobile phone) in mediating what people do with WeChat, and through this, to explore the usefulness of the model for researching individuals' everyday practices with social media platforms. Drawing on the empirical data we can see that, people's everyday practices in relation to social media are multifaceted; each element of the model adds a different dimension while all the elements are mutually enabled and constituted. This three-part model makes visible the entanglement and interrelatedness of the different mediators and brings to light the issues of ambivalence, agency, and connections as central to my research participants' everyday WeChat practices. Therefore, this conclusion draws together these emerging themes throughout the analysis, instead of offering summaries of each analytical chapters which were outlined at the end of chapters 5-8. Framing the conclusions in this way articulates the core issues from across the thesis, ties in with different elements of the three-part model, and presents answers to the following research questions:

1. What do people do and how do people understand what they do with WeChat?
2. How does WeChat mediate what people do with the platform?
3. How do mobile devices mediate what people do in relation to WeChat?

In this conclusion, I first present a summary of the key findings raised throughout the thesis. Following this is a reflection on the methodologies employed in this research, which included a) ethnographic interviewing with b) diary keeping and c) document analysis. Finally, I provide suggestions for future work, before closing with a wrap-up of my contribution to knowledge.

9.2 Summary and implications of findings

The thesis demonstrates the usefulness of my three-part model, incorporating the elements user, platform, and mobile phone, and in so doing, it proposes a useful framework for understanding what people do with social media. In looking at the ways WeChat was

embedded in people's everyday lives, my work has focused on four aspects: WeChat and intimacy; WeChat users' reluctance to share; monetised socialisation on WeChat; and users' perspectives on everyday data mining on WeChat, as outlined in Chapters 5 to 8, respectively. Running through all these dimensions of WeChat usage were a sense of ambivalence, a reflection of agency, and a form of connections which characterise users' everyday practices with WeChat and are important for understanding how WeChat is lived with individuals. Below, I discuss the main themes raised throughout the thesis and how they address the research questions outlined above.

9.2.1 Ambivalence

By considering the three-part model throughout the thesis, I found ambivalence to be a necessary characteristic of what users do with WeChat. The term ambivalence was coined by Bleuler (1911) to capture the common phenomenon whereby 'pleasant and unpleasant feelings simultaneously accompany the same experience' (Graubert and Miller, 1957, p. 458). Given the ubiquity and convergence of the contemporary media environment, 'media ambivalence is the dominant structure of feeling, and media practices are temporary, local, specific, and subject to change' (Ribak and Rosenthal, 2015).

In Chapter 5 Intimate WeChat, we saw most participants' everyday practices in relation to WeChat were socially constituted and driven by their desire to maintain personal and intimate relationships, underlining the importance of the user element of the three-part model in shaping what people do with WeChat. Yet these social connections afforded by WeChat could result in a situation of ambivalence. Whilst some participants embraced the convenience of achieving continuous relatedness with intimate others on WeChat, others reflected the feeling of being 'excessively tethered and connected' (Turkle, 2008) and in particular demonstrated antagonism against the 'work's intimacy' (Gregg, 2011) which resulted in constant availability and the endless engagements with WeChat. Such ambivalence was facilitated by the embeddedness of the platform in professional relationships and its incorporation as a pervasive presence in everyday life, and enhanced by the mobile device, which has been associated with 'connected presence' (Licoppe, 2004) and 'perpetual contact' (Katz and Aakhus, 2004) and through which people access WeChat. This

reflects the importance of the platform and mobile phone elements of the three-part model in shaping people's perceptions and practices with WeChat. My analysis of WeChat users' experiences and understanding of intimacy contributes to debates regarding intimacy within the social media context. The ambivalence was also manifested in users' relationships with WeChat, whilst the participants in China reflected a feeling of indispensability in terms of using WeChat to manage their everyday lives; such a feeling did not apply to participants in the UK, considering the limited functions of WeChat outside China and the situational constraints attached to it. This sheds light on the importance of region in shaping the way users relate to and approach WeChat.

The sense of ambivalence was also shown in users' practices of sharing. Chapter 5 showed that some participants engage in sharing to maintain relationships on WeChat, such as updating personal statuses and commenting and 'liking' others' posts. Yet, in Chapter 6 Reluctance to share, we saw not all participants valued the intimate connections that sharing brought – several expressed their reluctance to share and that they did not want to keep up with others through sharing. Such ambivalence was a result of people's perceptions of sharing and experience of intimacy, underlining the role of the user part of the three-part model in this process. Yet comments throughout the interviews also revealed that some did not completely avoid sharing on WeChat, despite their reluctance to do so. These users' sharing and non-sharing practices were constantly renegotiated and reshaped by shifts in personal preferences, responses from public audiences, the possibilities and constraints afforded by the platform, and the technical workings of their mobile phones. Such nuances around users' reluctance to share highlight the importance of the different elements of the three-part model in mediating people's ambivalent practices of sharing. My data also revealed that age is a contributing factor in the way that people engage in (non-) sharing: the older generation preferred to share with themselves instead of sharing publicly on WeChat, while the younger generation favoured other channels over WeChat for sharing. My analysis of participants' discussion of their sharing practices applied the seminal works of John (2013a, 2013b, 2017) and in particular drew on his discussion of sharing as 'constitutive activity of social media platforms.' My analysis is original in that I applied this theory to the mega-platform WeChat and within the Chinese context. Whilst demonstrating the ongoing relevance of John's work, my research contributes to the literature by nuancing understanding of sharing, specifically

through my argument that sharing is not a straightforward process in which participants engage every day.

Users also experience ambivalence as they engage with WeChat. Whilst a number of users were reluctant to engage with WeChat and connect with others through sharing, as shown in Chapter 6, many of them showed interest in engaging in and connecting with others through WeChat red packets. The rich narrative produced in Chapter 7 Monetised Socialisation demonstrates how users incorporated money into their everyday practices in relation to WeChat, either as a way of gifting, as participation in social gaming, as a form of messaging, or as a method of payment. These ambivalent practices in relation to WeChat can be understood through the three-part model. It is users' desire to both express intimacy and sustain relationships that inform their decisions to engage with WeChat red packets, as reflected by multiple participants. The platform aspect shapes users' monetary practices by mirroring the Chinese custom of gifting money on special occasions and providing opportunities for users to incorporate money into their everyday connections with social contacts through WeChat Red Packet and money Transfer functions. The platform's role cannot be understood in isolation from the mobile devices because WeChat frames the practices of monetary exchange as something that is suited to the particular experience of mobile devices. This means that a mobile phone is a condition of WeChat *hongbao*-related gifting, gaming, messaging and payment practices. The portability of the device, which is habitually carried on the person, presents the platform as handy, quick, almost instinctual, and provides the base through which users engage with monetary connections, especially in relation to participating in the 'grabbing red packets' social gaming and making (re)payments. By highlighting the importance of money in everyday connections in the context of WeChat, I advance existing discussion of social media and monetisation that is primarily focused on back-end monetisation. My research has highlighted that monetisation is also a front-end process on social media platforms, by exploring users' heterogeneous practices in relation to WeChat *hongbao*.

A final finding linked to ambivalence, which may also be seen to contribute to users' varied understandings of and responses to data mining, relates to participants' ambivalent feelings about everyday data mining on WeChat, as discussed in Chapter 8. Such ambivalence is a

result of the tailored experience of advertising messages in a user's news feed, which is curated by a combination of the platform's data mining and the mobile phone's real-time geographical location tracking, indicating the roles of the platform and the mobile device elements of the three-part model in this process. For example, a few participants showed a lack of concern about automated in-feed locational ads and considered them an acceptable trade-off; they were thus motivated to interact with WeChat by the benefits brought about by WeChat's data mining. Yet for some, these ads stirred up concern about their ebbing personal control and rising corporate power of disclosure of location data, which thus discouraged their practices with WeChat. These participants also framed unwanted data mining as a form of privacy invasion and reflected a feeling of futility about being able to avoid it. This reflects Draper and Turow's (2019) suggestion of 'digital resignation', which understands that people want control over the personal information that digital technologies have about them but that they feel incapable of doing so. This is especially the case with WeChat considering its embeddedness and essential role in everyday life, underlining the importance of the platform element of the three-part model in cultivating users' sense of digital resignation. Further analysis suggested that whilst several participants showed levels of understanding and concerns about WeChat's data mining, some participants in the UK reflected a lack of awareness of and concerns about this issue. This was partly due to their positive experience of having a private sphere on WeChat with fewer advertising messages, shedding light on the importance of region in matters of ambivalence.

Overall, my thesis revealed how users' everyday practices with WeChat are characterised by ambivalence. As discussed above, elements of user, platform, and mobile phone in the three-part model mediate such ambivalence about intimacy, sharing, monetised socialisation, and perspectives on data mining, in different ways. Thus I suggest that the three-part model opens space for capturing and making sense of the ambivalence of what people do with WeChat. Age and location were also identified as the other two factors that contribute to such ambivalence. Users' ambivalent practices can also be seen as a result of WeChat's embeddedness in everyday life, which is 'precisely the place where the complexity unfolds' (Plummer, 2013, p.506), and is 'characterised by puzzle, contradiction, accommodation and transformative possibilities' that are constantly 'made and unmade' (Neal and Murji, 2015, p.812). These characteristics of everyday life make ambivalence somewhat inevitable or at

least unsurprising. This confirms the usefulness of taking an everyday-life approach to exploring what people do with WeChat. Users' ambivalence sometimes stems from their resistance to and negotiation with the perceived implications of WeChat. Thus, ambivalence is linked to agency, as discussed in the following section.

9.2.2 Agency

Agency is used to understand the ability that people have in terms of 'affect[ing] the social relationships in which they are embedded' (Layder, 2006, p.4). Indeed, many participants in my research reflected thoughtfully on and acted with agency in relation to their everyday practices with WeChat. For example, it has been well documented within literature on social media sharing that social media platforms promote practices of sharing and encourage people to create and maintain positive social ties through sharing (John, 2017; Kennedy, 2020). Yet in Chapter 6 Reluctance to share, my research highlighted that a number of users did not always share in ways that platforms invited them to and how they promoted how their platforms to be used. These participants claimed that they carefully thought about and decided on what to disclose and what to keep private and demonstrated considerable agency when it came to sharing within the context of WeChat. Although there were nuances and complexities around participants' sharing and non-sharing practices as discussed above, for many, they engaged with sharing in a way that worked best for them. Their decisions to share or not can be seen as ways of exercising agency and navigating the structural forces of WeChat, reflecting de Certeau's (1984) argument that individuals use strategies to negotiate the plans in everyday life that are arranged for them by organizations or institutions. Here we can see the user element of the three-part model plays a significant role in mediating what people do with WeChat. Further analysis also showed that although several participants expressed a feeling of being excessively tethered to working connections, and a feeling of obligation to (immediately) engage with WeChat in working situations, not everyone felt the same level of pressure. In Chapter 6, some revealed a range of techniques for managing their online presence on WeChat, such as turning their phones to silent mode to resist immediate and continual contact and editing privacy settings to manage access to and visibility of work-related posts in response to sharing requests from others. These WeChat users became conscious editors, negotiating their mobile accessibility and whether and how to use WeChat

in their everyday connections with their social contacts, especially when the situation was forced. This is indicative of the importance of the user aspect of the model in shaping what people do with WeChat. The platform and mobile phone elements of the three-part model thus shaped how they did this.

Comments throughout the interviews also showed participants' awareness of the ways in which the platform mediates their everyday experience of WeChat, such as the algorithmic intervention in monetary practices and connections, as discussed in Chapter 7 Monetised Socialisation. Age was also an important factor that contributed to the difference in users' focus on the role WeChat performs in automating monetised socialisation. The younger participants tended to question the workings of the Holiday Red Packet, which guides users to make certain decisions about how much is appropriate to gift to a specific WeChat contact. They felt uncomfortable about the platform-oriented money-gifting practices and played around with the platform in an attempt to prove whether the accurately-suggested gifting amount was coincidental or calculated by the platform. The older group showed interest in the algorithmic allocation of the value of red packets that they grabbed in social gaming. They tailored their online practices, such as grabbing later or sooner, to generate different algorithmic outcomes and thus to gain desired results such as a bigger value in the grabbed red packets. Yet the way these older participants negotiated the lottery results of gaming did not always work as these red packets were calculated in real time rather than pre-located and thus what users received was totally random. This indicates the possibility of individual agency in the face of platform power and the role of the user part of the model in people's monetary practices and connections. Yet such possibility is constrained by the platform element of the three-part model.

A number of participants in my research demonstrated the intention of acting against what they saw as problematic structures of WeChat, such as mobile phone data tracking and ad targeting, which were outlined in Chapter 8 Everyday Data Mining on WeChat. Some reported that they adopted several tactics to negotiate WeChat's data mining, including using specific apps to prevent data tracking, engaging with alternative digital platforms to cater for their daily needs, and limiting the information they voluntarily shared. Here we can see the importance of the user element of the three-part model in users' responses to WeChat's data

mining and their attempt to influence the circumstances in which the personal data were captured and processed. Yet some applied tactics were fruitless under certain circumstances. For example, the generation of Moments ads is not only dependent on what users share but where they are (located by mobile phones) and what the platform promotes, which is beyond individual users to control. Thus, platform and mobile phone elements can limit scope for agency in terms of exerting control over the management of personal data. This speaks to Kennedy and others' (2020) argument that people 'want to exercise agency in relation to their data, but the conditions do not currently exist that enable them to do so' (p.24). Yet a few participants mentioned that they guard themselves from WeChat's data mining by limiting their use of WeChat or avoided engaging with certain services of WeChat when thrown into an unfavourable situation. This indicates that there is some room for individual agency in relation to data mining, even under constrained conditions. Toynbee (2007) suggests that 'structures impose limits on what people can do while never fully determining actions' (cited in Kennedy et al., 2015, p.2). This is clearly the case with WeChat – its data mining has the potential to be domineering but is also met with resistance. It was also recognised that younger participants were more active in negotiating WeChat's data mining practices when compared with the older participants in this research. Thus, age is an important factor that shapes the way users contend with WeChat's data mining.

Overall, I have demonstrated that the user wants and tries to act with agency within the context of WeChat, and that the platform and mobile phone constrain agency in certain ways. Thus the three-part model is a helpful way of considering the possibility of agency and thinking about the scope of agency users have in relation to their everyday WeChat practices. This indicates the mutual shaping of different elements of the three-part model and that each element affects another, pointing to the connections between the elements of the model (the focus of the following section), and the need for a comprehensive approach for understanding agency in the context of WeChat. A great number of scholars are concerned about agency and structure relations and whether users have agency in the context of social media; even those who do not use these terms directly are talking about this (Fuchs, 2011; Kennedy, 2016; Bucher, 2017; van Dijck, 2013a; Witzemberger, 2018). My analysis thus extends the discussion by reinforcing the idea that users have some agency within the context of social media, yet they are shaped and limited by technical structures (Kennedy, 2016; Kennedy et al., 2020).

9.2.3 Connections

All data chapters showed that WeChat is about connections, albeit in different ways. Here I use the term connections to describe: a) people connecting with other people, what van Dijck (2013a) refers to as 'human connectedness'; b) the profit-driven interconnections between platforms and third parties, what van Dijck (2013a) refers to as 'automated connectivity'; c) people connecting with their mobile phones; and d) interconnectedness between platform and mobile phone.

As discussed in Chapter 5 Intimate WeChat, most participants reflected in the interviews that connecting with others in different realms was the most important aim of engaging with WeChat. This in turn highlighted the irreplaceable role that WeChat plays in building and maintaining connections and the potential to accumulate social capital through connections made with people with different resources and status on WeChat. Many of these participants stated that they used money, in the form of WeChat *hongbao*, to sustain relationships and express intimacy. This new form of monetary connection, recognised in Chapter 7 Monetised Socialisation, has not been fully explored in the existing literature. Whilst younger adults were more inclined to incorporate self-representation and engage in phatic connection with others through red packets, older users were more drawn to the gameplay of 'grabbing WeChat red packets' to maintain intimacy with significant others. Clearly, age was an important factor that contributed to the difference in users' perceptions and engagements with monetary connections. The connections discussed above are socially driven, reflecting the arguments that were outlined in the literature review that the self is formed in relation to other people and that these relationship webs can impact on a person's thoughts and actions (Davies, 2015; Smart, 2007). Here the connections are between individuals and are therefore strongly linked to the user part of the three-part model. Such social value of connections is what van Dijck (2013a) refers to as 'connectedness'.

Moving away from the connections between users, my work also highlighted the automated forms of connections between platforms. In Chapter 8 Everyday Data Mining on WeChat, I introduced the concept of 'WeChat-ification' to understand how WeChat interconnects with

other digital platforms and mobile applications by enacting its programmability to enable third parties to build their apps on the platform and thus weaving the external digital spaces into WeChat. This enables WeChat to enclose a staggering amount of personal information and social interactions within the platform, and thus to harvest and control these user data that run through the practices with the platform every day. These data can be engineered and manipulated by the platform and quickly developed into valuable revenue: this is what van Dijck (2013a) refers to as connectivity. For example, WeChat captures comprehensive data about individuals and aggregates them to construct 'user profiles'. These profiling data was assumed to be used for WeChat Pay Score, which can potentially regulate users' practices and shape their access to certain information, services and connections (Creemers, 2018; Wong and Dobson, 2019). Here the connections are between platforms and are therefore linked to the platform part of the three-part model. This analysis of WeChat-ification and the ways in which it results in platform power in everyday life contributes to platform studies and understandings of social media. WeChat represents a comprehensive Chinese social media platform that is different to other platforms, and the characteristics discussed herein may be specific to WeChat. I thus argue that far greater attention should be given to a broad range of platforms, rather than just the big Western platforms, if academia is to advance knowledge and understanding of the implications of social media in everyday life more thoroughly.

Users' connections with their mobile devices were explored in detail in Chapter 5. For some participants, their everyday practices in relation to WeChat were bound up with their intimate connections with their mobile phones. These intimate connections related to their emotional attachment to and dependence on mobile phone in everyday life, and to the sensory contact and 'multiple ways of physicality' (Garde-Hansen and Gorton, 2013). The inseparability of bodies and mobile devices as well as WeChat's integration into mobile phone enabled an embodied experience of WeChat use for some users, contributing to the ever-blurring relationships between WeChat and users, and resulting in the construction of 'me and my mobile WeChat'. As such, being on WeChat represents an extension of an embodied way of being and acting in everyday life. This achieves what Haraway (1985) calls 'cyborgs', beings with biological and mechanical parts, contributing to the discussion of the relationship between human and digital technologies and expanding the currently limited understanding of how social media is 'intimately incorporated into routine bodily practices' (Beer, 2012,

p.362). Here we can see how the connections between users and mobile phones shape the way they relate to and engage with WeChat.

The interconnectedness between the platform and the mobile phone has also been highlighted throughout the analytical chapters. This provides an answer to my last two research questions: how do platform and mobile mediate what people do with WeChat? For example, the routine and repetitive experience of the platform and the ‘humility’ of the mobile phone on which WeChat is based have created a sense of taken-for-grantedness and shaped the background role of WeChat in a few users’ everyday lives and its invisibility to their vision, as discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 8 showed how the platform and mobile phone work together to pinpoint users’ real-time whereabouts and analyse the data for service provision and ads targeting, and thus shape users’ differing levels of understanding of WeChat’s data mining and the way they engage with WeChat. In debates about mobile social media, mobile devices and social media platforms are often treated as ‘separate (physical or digital) objects which function independently from each other and from the environments in which they are used’ (Willems, 2020, p.1). However, digital platforms have increasingly launched mobile app versions and are frequently adopted and used through mobile devices. This is particularly the case in the Chinese context as noted in Chapter 3 Digital Landscape in China: 99.3 percent of Internet users in China accessed the Internet via their mobile phones (CNNIC, 2020). My three-part model helps to understand the interconnectedness between mobile devices and social media platforms, and the combination of the two in mediating people’s everyday practices in relation to WeChat. By rejecting an approach which sees mobile devices and social media platforms as independent from each other, my research makes links between mobile media studies and platform studies, which are often seen as separate sub-fields in digital media studies, and thereby expands current understanding and offers new insight into both fields.

Therefore, I suggest that what people do with WeChat is a result of the connections between different elements of the three-part model, including user-to-user, platform-to-platform, user-to-mobile phone, and platform-to-mobile phone. This again highlights the importance of the three-part model in understanding this process – people’s everyday practices with

WeChat are shaped not only by the elements of the three-part model, but by the connections between them.

9.3 Methodological Reflections

The thesis aimed to explore the role of the 'three-part model' (user, platform, and mobile phone) in mediating what people do with WeChat. A combined qualitative method which included a) ethnographic interviewing with b) diary keeping and c) document analysis was employed. This combination of methods makes analysis of the role of the three elements in the three-part model possible. As has been shown in this chapter and throughout the empirical analysis chapters, novel understandings of the role that the three-part model plays in mediating users' everyday practices with WeChat – and the ways in which elements of the three-part model are entangled – have emerged.

Ethnographic interviewing was employed in this research to capture descriptive accounts of people's engagements with and experience of WeChat and to observe their interactions with mobile phones and WeChat in real time. Interviewing people about their WeChat-related practices and listening to them talk about their usage as they saw it helped to capture how people understand what they do with WeChat. By incorporating ethnographic elements into standard interviews, I was able to investigate participants' WeChat practices as they unfold and perform and as they are reported and demonstrated. For example, I was able to capture users' ambivalent practices with WeChat, such as their nuanced experience of intimacy, layered engagement in sharing and *hongbao*-related monetary practices, and varied responses to WeChat's data mining. I was also able to access users' embodied relationships with mobile devices, such as their physical interactions with and personalisation of their mobile devices. These details have been empirically valuable because they revealed how their relationships with mobile devices mediated their WeChat practices. This method built on the small body of literature that has examined creative interviewing (Mason, 2010; Mason and Davies, 2009) in sociological research. It has thus extended existing work by using *ethnographic* interviewing techniques in research with social media users.

One of the methodological challenges of the fieldwork was to conduct ethnographic interviews with eight older male participants. My positionality as a younger female researcher sometimes limited the possibility of establishing relationships and building rapport with them. I felt that I had less control over the conversation with these participants than others and it was difficult to encourage them to engage actively and contribute to an in-depth conversation. This might have been due to both the generational and gender differences in our experiences and opinions and to my limited experience of carrying out qualitative research. As a result, not all participants were investigated in the same depth as I would have wanted, which reduced the possibility for exploring the multiplicity of practices in relation to WeChat and comparing levels of engagement in and attitudes towards WeChat across two age groups.

The diary method aimed to enable analysis of users' WeChat practices in everyday settings. The habitual, taken-for-granted nature of the way people engage with WeChat could be difficult for participants to provide retrospective verbalised accounts in the interview. Thus I hoped to capture users' routine engagements with WeChat through the diary method. However, this method was not as useful as I thought it would be in the actual event: only 12 out of 41 participants kept a diary, with different levels of completion, although £10 vouchers or small gifts were provided to incentivise people to produce their diaries. This result was partly due to diary keeping requiring 'a time commitment on the part of the participants and a willingness to regularly complete it and follow any guidelines' (Kenton, 2010). Although this affected research outcomes, most ethnographic interviews were conducted smoothly and generated rich data which addressed some of the everyday aspects of WeChat practices and experiences that I wanted to explore.

Document analysis was used to understand the mediation of WeChat in everyday life from the perspective of the platform. This approach to a certain extent enabled me to access what WeChat does and how it operates (on/with mobile devices) in shaping what people do with WeChat. Undertaking document analysis provides a particular facet of underlying intentions and workings of digital platforms (van Dijck, 2013a; Burgess and Baym, 2020). Yet one of the common problems with this approach in platform research is that social media platforms are notoriously 'black-boxed' and thus it can be difficult to access and completely understand how they exactly work (Kennedy, 2016). Nonetheless, I was able to collect some relevant

documents that allowed for an understanding of automated monetary connections on WeChat and WeChat's data mining practices, for example. The analysis enabled me to attend to the mediation of platform and mobile phone elements of three-part model in users' everyday lives to at least some extent.

However, collecting documents and evaluating their quality were time-consuming tasks due to the gaps and scarcity of relevant documents. The low accessibility of certain documents, the incompleteness and inconsistency of the data from the documentation, and the outdated coverage and commentaries (with the development of WeChat) led to more searching and reliance on additional documents than I originally planned. By highlighting these complexities, I hope that future research can take such issues into consideration and manage their time and resources efficiently, as researchers approach the workings of the platform through document analysis.

9.4 Directions for Future Research

In this research, I have worked to build a holistic approach, what I call the three-part model, to understand what people do with social media. I have demonstrated the usefulness of the three-part model within the context of WeChat and so this approach has the potential to be used in the study of other social media platforms and mobile applications that encompass almost every aspect of everyday life. For example, it would be valuable to adopt this research to study another Chinese social media platform, such as TikTok, which is becoming a global phenomenon and increasingly embedded into the fabric of everyday life like WeChat before it.

This thesis focused on WeChat users in two different age groups in both the UK and China. Apart from age and location, gender is another factor that can impact upon what people do with WeChat (Gan, 2017). Thus further study can draw out variations of users' everyday practices with WeChat through the exploration of gender. Another possible line of enquiry would be comparisons of Guangdong province (including the cities of Shenzhen and Guangzhou, which are the birth places of Tencent and WeChat, respectively) with other places (such as Zhejiang province, in which Alipay was launched, and Beijing, where TikTok

and Weibo were released), or an urban setting sample with a rural area. Such comparison would be useful for the further examination of whether and how geography produces specific genres of incorporation of WeChat into everyday life. Furthermore, a larger sample would make possible comparisons across demographic distinctions such as age, gender and region, and would be helpful in increasing the generalisability of these findings. It seems to me that, by studying these alternatives, we could explore whether and how individuals' practices in relation to WeChat are maintained and challenged in different social contexts.

Discussion in Chapter 8 revealed the potential implications of the implementation of WeChat Pay Score (WPS), and that it might serve the interests of Chinese authorities and be part of the development of the Social Credit System (SCS) in China. However, these are currently understudied topics, and so the social and ethical consequences of WPS deserve more scholarly attention and the relationship between WPS and China's SCS can be a further point of enquiry. It would also be interesting to build upon the three-part model proposed in this thesis to explore how users perceive and approach this WeChat rating system. Such a focus would contribute significantly to the understanding of the future mediation of WeChat in aspects of people's everyday lives.

In the four years since the start of this thesis, there have been several changes in the updates of WeChat. Two major updates were made during Christmas 2018 and December 2020, including the design of the interface and the launch of several new features. This study was conducted before the major changes of WeChat were made in December 2018. As mobile and social media continue to evolve at a rapid rate, it would be worth updating this study to determine whether and what people do with WeChat has changed, with a range of new built-in services, that are more complex and versatile than those discussed at the time of the fieldwork. That continual research remains to be done on what people do with the ever-expanding mega-platform WeChat points to the significance and timeliness of this thesis.

9.5 My Contribution to Knowledge

My thesis makes several contributions to knowledge. These have been outlined throughout the thesis and drawn together under each of the themes in section 9.2 of this chapter. To conclude, I recap the key contributions here.

The most significant contribution relates to my proposal of the three-part model, made up of user, platform, and mobile phone. I evaluated different frameworks for understanding distinct aspects of digital media technologies, such as Du Gay and others' (1997) 'circuit of culture' model and van Dijck's (2013a) framework for disassembling platforms as microsystems. I developed a model to understand people's everyday practices with social media, drawing on some elements from Du Gay and others' and van Dijck's models, including user and platform, introducing elements that, to date, have not been adequately taken into account, namely the mobile device, and excluding some elements that are beyond the scope of my research. It is important to add that my thesis departed from literature which prioritises state regulation as an important factor for understanding social media in China. Instead I discussed other central characteristics in the infrastructuralisation of platforms in the context of the Chinese Internet. Doing so provides a new way of researching Chinese social media like WeChat and the composition and configuration of WeChat-related practices, and furthers understanding of digital media issues in China. My analysis of the literature suggested that previous studies provide a spectrum of descriptions of what people do with social media, focusing either on users' perceptions, the mediation of platforms, or the mediation of mobile devices. The above perspectives only partially explain certain constitutions of people's practices with mobile social media applications. I brought these three essential aspects of people's social media use together and proposed a more inclusive framework for examining people's everyday practices with social media, thus advancing a holistic analytical approach for understanding what people do with social media.

Through this model, I have addressed a multiplicity of situated practices with social media in an everyday context. For example, in Chapter 5, we saw different ways that WeChat relates to intimacy and how what people do with WeChat is a result of such intimacy afforded by WeChat. Chapter 6 emphasised that people's everyday practices of sharing are in the process

of being mediated and negotiated, nuancing understanding of sharing as a straightforward process which users engage in every day. Through a focus on the front-end monetisation of the platform, Chapter 7 discussed the involvement of money into people's everyday practices on WeChat, suggesting that WeChat reframes the configuration of sociality by extending the possibilities of connections in a monetised way. In Chapter 8, I highlighted that people's everyday practices are performed in accordance with their perceptions of data mining and pointed out the future ways in which WeChat might mediate aspects of individuals' everyday lives. Centring on the distinctively all-inclusive mega-platform WeChat, my thesis makes several contributions to core debates in social media studies, including in relation to intimacy, sharing, monetisation, and data mining. These chapters speak to the three-part model in different ways. While the relations of these elements contribute equally to the specific everyday practices, some elements are more pronounced than others. Whilst each element of the three-part model shapes the ways in which WeChat relates to intimacy, the user element of the three-part model plays a dominant role in how WeChat users engage in everyday sharing and non-sharing practices. Whilst users' heterogeneous everyday monetary practices on WeChat are constituted through the interlinked three parts of the model, WeChat users' different levels of understandings and responses to data mining are shaped primarily by the platform and mobile phone elements, with the user element receding into the background. Running through all these dimensions of WeChat usage are a sense of ambivalence, a reflection of agency, and a form of connections which characterise users' everyday practices with WeChat and are central for understanding how WeChat is lived with individuals. It is the intersections of the three mediators of the model that bring to light and make sense of these issues as I highlighted in 9.2 above. As such, my thesis affords a discussion of the entanglement and interrelatedness of the three different elements which mediate what people do with social media, and demonstrates the three-part model as a useful analysis tool for understanding the everydayness of routinized and mundane practices with social media.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Participant Overview

Sample	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Region	Recruited through	Profile
1	Han (pilot study)	27	Male	Chinese	Manchester, UK	Attending events & leafleting	Han has been in the UK for 5 years and is currently working for the government. He describes himself as an easygoing person who likes to make friends on social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo. Yet he avoids answering questions that would reveal his personal information when strangers approach him on WeChat.
2	Ji (pilot study)	58	Female	Chinese	Leeds, UK	Store visiting & leafleting	Ji is a doctor and owns a company in the middle of England. She has been living in UK for 16 years and describes herself as a real home-loving type. She plans to develop her business on WeChat by creating an official account.

3	Zac	25	Male	Chinese	Sheffield, UK	Organisation	Zac is studying food and nutrition in the university. He is from a single-parent family and describes himself as a people person. He constantly checks his mobile phone during the interview and claims that he is always on WeChat.
4	Pang	25	Male	Chinese	Liverpool, UK	Organisation	Pete is in his second year of his PhD and the chair of a Chinese Student community in England. His family owns a company in China and is the only Child of his family. He describes himself as very sociable and frequently talks to friends on WeChat for hours when he has time.
5	Ted	18-30	Male	Chinese	Liverpool, UK	Attending events & leafleting	Ted works as a laboratory technician for a cooperative education programme. He confirms that he falls into the younger group, but prefer not to reveal his exact age. He is a graduate of a famous university in China and a fan of cars. He keeps up to date with the latest car news through magazines and WeChat official accounts.

6	Yvonne	72	Female	Chinese	Cardiff, UK	Organisation	Yvonne is a 72-year-old homemaker and currently looking after her grandchildren in the UK. She is a fan of traditional Chinese medicine and horticultural activities. WeChat is the only social media she is using nowadays.
7	Hugo	over 50	Male	Chinese	Leeds, UK	referral from personal network	Hugo is a hairdresser and has been living in UK for 20 years. He declines to reveal his exact age while confirming that he falls into the older group. He lives alone in England and travels back to China to visit his family every year. He thinks WeChat is a convenient tool for connection and business development.
8	Kim	63	Male	Chinese	Cardiff, UK	Organisation	Kim is a retired factory worker and has been in UK for 40 years. Kim prefers is reserved in the interview and his responses were generally succinct. Kim takes exercise every day and has been leading a sports club in the community for the past three years.

9	Lily	60	Female	Chinese	Cardiff, UK	Organisation	Lily is used to be a chef and has been in the UK for 43 years. She has two daughters, both of whom are working in London. She really enjoys the convenience that mobile phone/WeChat brought to her.
10	Shelly	23	Female	British Born Chinese	London, UK	Store visiting & leafleting	Shelly was born and raised in England and dropped out of school to take over her family business. Her mother works in a local community and her father is the owner of a Chinese supermarket. She has a little brother (13 years old) and gets on well with him. Her friends often describe her as having a 'crazy' personality although she thinks that deep down she was quite serious.
11	Qing	28	Male	Chinese	Leeds, UK	Organisation	Qing has been working for an electronic company for 3 years as a product manager. He was born in a small town of southeast China and is the only child of his family. He primarily uses WeChat to connect with his families in China and colleagues in both the UK and China.

12	Alva	22	Female	Chinese	Leeds, UK	Snowball sampling	Alva is a daigou and describes herself as a professional fashion buyer. Her career objective is to be a successful business women and her interests are making money and traveling around the world. She mainly uses WeChat for her business and is always on WeChat on different mobile devices.
13	Zoe	66	Female	Chinese	Manchester, UK	Organisation	Zoe is a retired head teacher of a middle school. She moved with her daughter to England two years ago. She really enjoys the life after finishing working full-time and raising her family and finally has time to pursue her interests and spend time with her friends. She takes exercises twice a week and spends a lot of time online.
14	Sam	63	Male	Chinese	Manchester, UK	Attending events& leafleting	Sam was skilled in the use of mobile phone and WeChat and leads a wave of tech-savvy seniors. He lives in a small town in southern China and visits his son in England every summer and usually stay for a few months. He didn't go to university and formerly ran small business in eastern China. He

							relishes his role as a bridge between seniors (of his family and friends) and WeChat.
15	Linda	30	Female	Chinese	London, UK	referral from personal network	Linda is a freelancer and works as a part-time officer in an art gallery in London. All of the examples she gave are closely linked to her profession, she became super excited when talking about the paintings and other works of art. She was very cooperative and showed me her phone actively when needed during the interview.
16	Grace	20	Female	Chinese	Beijing, China	Attending events & leafleting	Grace is a freelancer and a 'professional' fan of a Chinese male pop singer. She has been a fan of him for 6 years and now is in charge of his fans club in Beijing. She is responsible for providing all-round enthusiastic support to her idol, including managing the Weibo account and WeChat fans groups in Beijing, informing the dates and locations of shows and concerts.

17	William	50	Male	Chinese	Beijing, China	referral from personal network	William works as a financial officer in an educational training centre in Beijing. He was born and raised in northern China and the oldest child of four siblings. He relies on mobile phone and WeChat to keep in touch with his son (a third-year university student in western China), parents and other family members.
18	Clare	30	Female	Chinese	Beijing, China	Organisation	Clare is a secretary at a university in Beijing. Her duties involve supporting the everyday life of undergraduates and the delivery of their teaching and examinations. Her parents were busy with her work and sent her off to a boarding school when she was 11. Her friends describe her as outgoing, noisy and loud, but underneath, she thought she is a shy, lonely and self-abased person conversely.
19	Henry	25	Male	Chinese	Beijing, China	Snowball sampling	Henry received his postgraduate degree in 2017 and works as a vet in a pet hospital now. He is not able to afford accommodation in city centre and has to share an apartment with two other people in an inner suburb. It takes him almost two hours

							to go to work every day. He usually uses WeChat to buy breakfast on the street and scan his smartphone to purchase underground tickets.
20	Lou	29	Female	Chinese	Beijing, China	Organisation	Lou is a senior editor who works in radio station in Beijing. She has to take her mobile phone with her all the time so as not to miss any calls from her colleagues or readers. She plays online games on her smartphone whenever she has some spare time.
21	Zhu	27	Male	Chinese	Beijing, China	referral from personal network	Zhu works as an officer in a biotechnology company. He is the only child of his family and wishes he had siblings that he could share secrets and memories with. He enjoys making friends and keeps in touch with his cousins because he thinks they are/can be the brothers and sisters he always wanted. WeChat is an irreplaceable part of his life and used for different purposes.

22	Carol	59	Female	Chinese	Lanzhou, China	Attending events& leafleting	Carol is a housewife who was born in a rural area of a developing city and never went to college. She is also a devout believer who comes to church to 'worship' every Sunday. She also creates a WeChat group for the regular church attenders like her. They recite a verse from the Bible within the WeChat group every day and often end up with saying 'we gather because God has united us' in their voice messages.
23	Richard	28	Male	Chinese	Lanzhou, China	referral from personal network	Richard is an ex-serviceman and plans to start his own business in 2019. He is the only child of his family and in a long-distance relationship for three years. His usage of a social media platform depends on who use it and what he can benefit from it. WeChat is mostly used to connect with his schoolmates and top up his mobile phone.
24	Wang	66	Female	Chinese	Lanzhou, China	Attending events& leafleting	Wang is a vice chancellor of a local collage. She was a zhiqing ('educated' youth) who was sent to rural areas during Cultural Revolution for re-education. She was sensitive to political issues and admonish

							me against including political discussions in my thesis. WeChat is the mostly used app for her every day, she highly embraces the possibilities and opportunities that WeChat has brought to her.
25	Jane	54	Female	Chinese	Shanghai, China	Snowball sampling	Jane works for a state-owned enterprise as an officer. She has been working for this company for 25 years and still has a passion for her work. She started to use WeChat to connect with her daughter who works in Singapore and becomes gradually addicted to it. She is a fan of WeChat groups and believes that everything can sorted out within different functional WeChat groups.
26	Tina	27	Female	Chinese	Shanghai, China	referral from personal network	Tina serves a Construction Engineering Company in Shanghai as a HR specialist for three years after graduation. She is responsible for company recruitment, investigation on potential employees' background, and personnel appointment and removal. She is the only child of her family and set up her own family in Shanghai last year. She uses

							WeChat and QQ both for personal connections and work.
27	Sue	54	Female	Chinese	Shanghai, China	Attending events& leafleting	Sue is a chief editor at a press in Shanghai. She was born in a rural village in western China and is the youngest child among two girls and two boys. She and her husband are extremely addicted to their mobile phones. She thought that her relationship with her husband are highly influenced by their smartphones and iPads at the dinner table and marital bed.
28	Te	26	Male	Chinese	Shanghai, China	Attending events& leafleting	Te is a technical staff in a pharmaceutical company. He loves his job and describes himself as a workaholic. For him, different social media channels are used for different purposes. He thought WeChat is no longer a personal place for him because there is a lot of things to be taken into consideration when sharing online.
29	Lee	58	Female	Mexican	Shanghai, China	Store visiting & leafleting	Lee is a manager of a food company has been living in China for 8 years. She uses mobile phone and

							smartwatch to keep track of her body parameters such as motion, heart rate and quality of sleep. She considered WeChat Moments as a private place to record funny, memorable and pivotal moments of her life.
30	Dan	59	Male	Chinese	Guangzhou, China	Attending events& leafleting	'WeChat pay or cash' is the most frequently used phrases for Dave as a part-time taxi driver. He keeps his mobile phone on 24/7 in order to connect with his daughter who is studying MBA in the US. He felt guilty over keeping their partner awake with the incessant beeping of a smartphone well into the night.
31	Yang	21	Male	Chinese	Guangzhou, China	Attending events& leafleting	Yang is a third-year student of a well-known university in Guangzhou. He is a regular attender of the university English Corner and a devoted fan of Arsenal Football Club. He greatly embraces the possibilities that WeChat brought to him and happily shares that he is able to pay their tuition fee and accommodation fee via WeChat.

32	Tong	23	Female	Chinese	Guangzhou, China	Organisation	Tong works as an officer in a local bank. She entirely relies on WeChat for connecting with her parents and partner. She feels that she is more reliable on mobile phone than before because of the versatile services provided by WeChat. She feels great because she can only bring a mobile phone with her when going outside.
33	Judy	27	Female	Chinese	Guangzhou, China	referral from personal network	Judy is a designer and an alumina of Sheffield university. She was engaged a week before the interview and is excited to build a new family with her fiancé. She has always been bombarded with work messages on WeChat and feels upset and angry about it. She shares her daily routines with her friends on WeChat every day after graduation.
34	Frank	30	Male	Italian	Guangzhou, China	Organisation	Frank is from Italy and has lived in China for a long time. He moved to China with his parents in 2004. He becomes an insurance agent after his graduation from the local university. He felt it was amazing and really enjoyed that he could do almost everything with his smartphone in the city by

							downloading WeChat and Alipay and connecting them to his bank accounts.
35	Naomi	24	Female	Chinese	Lanzhou, China	Organisation	Naomi works was born and raised in western China. She is the second child of her family and on good terms with her sister and brother. She graduated from the local college last year and works as a nurse in a local hospital. She is a selfie-addict and obsessed with taking and editing photos.
36	Rachel	50	Female	Chinese	Lanzhou, China	Snowball sampling	Rachel is an account and is a mother of two children. She now lives with her husband and his parents in a big house in city centre. She is responsible for taking care of her parents in law and looking after her grandchildren when needed. She describes herself as a WeChat addict and has a habit of checking WeChat messages regularly.
37	Luna	51	Female	Chinese	Shenzhen, China	Snowball sampling	Luna is a store owner and manage the store business with his husband. She has never been to colleague and ran her business since she was 18.

							She feels closer to her mobile phone than other people around her. She makes fun of his obsession with mobile phones by saying that it provides the companionship that her husband cannot offer.
38	Ben	54	Male	Chinese	Shenzhen, China	Organisation	Ben has a doctoral degree and is a government official of the bureau of agriculture. He is a very private person and values his privacy more than connecting. He doesn't want his WeChat Moments posts and comments spread around and doesn't trust WeChat not do that. He can't tell if the benefits of flexibility and connection that WeChat and internet promise outweigh the negatives.
39	Mia	25	Female	Chinese	Shenzhen, China	Attending events & leafleting	Mia is a journalist and mainly uses WeChat for mobile payment, work communication, and personal connections. The first thing she does in the office is turn on her laptop and log into her WeChat and QQ accounts. She received a call from her boss last night and felt unhappy when she is being reached by her boss at any time.

40	Bob	68	Male	Chinese	Shenzhen, China	Snowball sampling	<p>Bob is a retired white-collar worker in Shenzhen. He likes to have mobile phones with a big size of display. He uses WeChat groups to chat with different circles of friends and to share personal news with families and relatives. At the same time, he found it easy to get frustrated with information overload on WeChat and not being able to find contacts easily.</p>
41	Matt	50	Male	American	Shenzhen, China	referral from personal network	<p>Matt is American and has been living in Shenzhen over 20 years. He is a hotel owner in Shenzhen and thinks that WeChat is necessary for a foreigner living in China. He prefers to use different digital platforms to cater for his daily need. He often sends event and promotional news to potential customers, or share and discuss business-related information on WeChat.</p>

Appendix 2. Participant Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand what the research involves and how your personal data will be used. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you want. Do not hesitate to ask me if you have any questions or if you would like more information.

What is the research about?

The project title is: A Three-part Framework for Understanding People's Everyday Practices on WeChat. This research is about people's activities on and perceptions of WeChat. The purpose of this research is to understand how people like you engage with WeChat. I would like to know how you use, experience, and feel about the WeChat app in your daily social interactions.

Do you have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign two consent forms. You have the right to withdraw at any time and do not have to give a reason, but the right cannot extend to the withdrawal of already published findings.

What will happen if you take part?

First, I shall ask you to keep a one day diary of your activities on WeChat prior to the interview. You can decide what to record and what to share with me. I will provide a diary template, a diary sample and appropriate instructions to assist you.

The interview will last about an hour. We will talk about how you use WeChat and what you think about the mobile app. I will ask you to show me some of your posts or images on WeChat and if I am allowed to take photos of what you show. I will not include any identifiable, private and sensitive information (such as profile photo or usernames) when taking photos. If I have observed some information from your WeChat friends, I will not use it as research data. The interview will be audio recorded, to ensure accuracy. The audio recording will be deleted once it has been transcribed and checked.

Will your participation in this project be kept confidential?

Yes. What you write in the diary, what you say during our discussions and what you show in the interview, as well as your personal information will be fully anonymised and kept strictly confidential. All personal data will be stored securely following the University of Sheffield's Research Data Management Policy. Any data collected from you is only used for this project and will be disposed of securely immediately after the study ends.

Will there be any advantages or disadvantages?

There is no physical risk or harm involved. It is hoped that this work will help you to better understand your daily interactions on/with/through WeChat, and to reflect on the role of the WeChat app in shaping your everyday activities and experiences.

What will I do with the data?

The data will be part of my PhD research, but I will also use it in reports, presentations and other publications. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved by the Department of Sociological Studies in accordance with the University of Sheffield's research ethics policy.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to email me on jl141@sheffield.ac.uk or call me on +44-7749298577 (UK mobile) or +86-18793175081 (China mobile).

If you want to talk to my supervisor for verification or questions, please contact Professor Helen Kennedy at h.kennedy@sheffield.ac.uk.

Thanks for reading this!

Appendix 3. Leaflet



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

Research Participants Needed



- Are you on WeChat?
- Do you use WeChat everyday?
- Are you aged between 18 and 30, OR over 50?
- Do you want to talk about your experiences of using WeChat?

I am a PhD researcher at University of Sheffield in recruiting users to take part in a research project. This research aims to understand how you use, experience and feel about WeChat in your everyday life.

Interested in taking part or know someone who might be?
Or want to know more about the project?

Please contact Jiaxun at jli141@sheffield.ac.uk,
leave a message at 07749298577 (UK number)

Appendix 4. Interview Topic Guides

• Introducing/initial open-ended questions

- How do you like to be called? Tell me a little about yourself. Education, Family members, Personality, Pastime and hobby.
- What social media platforms are you using nowadays?
- What do you use them for? How would you compare WeChat with other social media you are using?

• Perceptions of mobile phones

1. Ownership of mobile phone

- What phone have you got?
- Why do you choose this brand?
- How long have you had it?
- How often do you change your phone?
- Why did you choose this one?
- Which is the mostly used? Apps, texts or calls? Can you elaborate on that?
- Are there any particular features of mobile phones or apps that are particularly important to you? Can you explain your reasons?

2. Mobile phone customisation

- Do you personalise your mobile phones? How and why? can you show me?
- How do you choose your phone cover/ other decorations?
- Why do you use them, what do they mean to you?
- Can you show me around your screen saver, wall paper, installed apps, ringtones... etc? Why do you do (set up your phone) like this?

3. How do you like your phone?

- How attached would you say you are to it, can you elaborate on that?
- How do you feel about being able to reach or be reached by other people at any time?
- What do you do/feel if your phone is not with you?
- Where and when do you use your phone, what do you use it for?

- What do you treat your phone as, is it a device, a friend...can you elaborate on that?
- What does mobile phone mean to you, about fashion, status and pride?

• **Personal experience on WeChat**

1. 'Me' on WeChat

- When did you initially start using WeChat? Why did you decide to use it?
- How frequently do you log onto WeChat each day? How long do you spend on WeChat each day?
- On what device do you mostly check your WeChat, your phone or another device? Why?
- How often do you check WeChat on your mobile phone (compared to other devices)?
- Do you use real name, profile photo, bio on WeChat, and why?
- Do you have your profile set to public or private, or what level of privacy settings do you have?

2. How would you characterise your use of WeChat? [with dairies]

- Who are your WeChat contacts? How do you become WeChat friends with them?
- What do you post on WeChat?
- Tell me about your latest post, can you show me?
- How does it feel to post? What do you get from your posts?
- Who gets access to you friend circle page? Who do you want to be able to see your Moments?
- Do you market your WeChat page, why?
- Do you ever thinking about what kind of impression you want to convey when you post images of yourself?
- How do you select content? Can you take me through the process (preparation, what content? where? number of edits/takes, what factors are taken into consideration)
- Do you look at other people's posts/images?
- Do you comment on others' posts/images, can you give me some examples?
- What do you usually do on/ through WeChat?/ what else do you usually do on WeChat?
- How do you become interested in this (specific actions/categories on WeChat, such as official account, games, WeChat wallet, Red Packets and mini-programmes)?
- How do you use this service/feature/function?
- What draw you to do this?

- What do you hope to achieve by doing this?
- What do you feel about it? What is the difference between using this on WeChat and on other platforms?
- Is there anything you would use WeChat for that you don't use other digital platforms for, and why?
- Is there any special aspect of your life that you use WeChat for?
- Can you think of times when WeChat influence your behaviours, can you give me some examples?
- How much influence do you think WeChat has on your actions?
- Can you give me examples of where you have been restricted in your choices on doing things on WeChat? What do you think of them?
- What are the unexpected or intrusive things that WeChat did to you? Can you elaborate on that?

3. How has your use of WeChat changed over time?

- Have your goals/aims changed?
- Has the way you use WeChat changed since when you first started using it?
- What influenced those changes?
- How do you feel about it?

4. How do you like WeChat?

- Pre- WeChat life VS now, does it look any different?
- WeChat brands itself as a new lifestyle, would you agree, or disagree, why?
- How important do you think WeChat is in your life? Can you explain your reasons?
- What kind of stuff are you attracted to on WeChat?
- Do you feel that WeChat can be an advantage in your social and professional life, if yes/no, why?
- What aspects about the WeChat that you like or dislike? Why?
- Are there features on WeChat you would prefer not to have? Why?
- How would you describe WeChat to someone who has never come across it before?
- Is there anything about your personal experience in relation to WeChat that is important to you that you would like to add?

Appendix 5. Pre-consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project:

A Three-part Framework for Understanding People’s Everyday Practices on WeChat

Name of Researcher: Jiaxun Li

Participant Identification Number for this project: **Please**
box **initial**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet detailing the research project and I am happy to share my stories and views with the researcher.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. I am free to decline to answer if I feel uncomfortable about some questions.

3. I understand it is part of the interview that I may show the researcher my WeChat on my phone. I also understand I will be asked if it is okay to take photos of what I show.

4. I understand that the interview will be recorded. I understand the diary record, interview transcripts, and ethnographic notes and images will only be handled by the researcher.

5. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for the researcher to access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

6. I know that the findings of this project will be reproduced in PhD thesis, presentations and future research publications, I agree for the data collected from me to be used in:

Thesis Presentation Journal articles Other publications

7. I agree to take part in the above research project.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant.

Thank you for participating in our project. If you have any queries about this form or about the project or your participation in it, please do not hesitate to contact me.

There are two copies of the consent form, one copy is for me to keep.

Appendix 6. Post-consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project:

A Three-part Framework for Understanding People’s Everyday Practices on WeChat

Name of Researcher: Jiaxun Li

This form refers to photographs you supplied and allowed me to take. All images will be securely stored and only be handled by the researcher. If you consent, I may use images as research data and may use some of them in conference presentations and other publications. Please could you tick the boxes below to indicate whether or not you are happy for me to do this.

Images	I give permission to use this image in the research and related publications	I give my consent for the image to be used in	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	thesis	<input type="checkbox"/>
		presentations	<input type="checkbox"/>
		journal articles	<input type="checkbox"/>
		other publications	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	thesis	<input type="checkbox"/>
		presentations	<input type="checkbox"/>
		journal articles	<input type="checkbox"/>
		other publications	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	thesis	<input type="checkbox"/>
		presentations	<input type="checkbox"/>
		journal articles	<input type="checkbox"/>

		other publications	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	thesis	<input type="checkbox"/>
		presentations	<input type="checkbox"/>
		journal articles	<input type="checkbox"/>
		other publications	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	thesis	<input type="checkbox"/>
		presentations	<input type="checkbox"/>
		journal articles	<input type="checkbox"/>
		other publications	<input type="checkbox"/>

I give my consent for all these photos to be reproduced in thesis, presentations, journal articles and other related publications.	<input type="checkbox"/>
I do not wish any of these photographs to be reproduced in connection with this research project.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of Participant Date Signature

Researcher Date Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant.

Thank you for participating in our project. If you have any queries about this form or about the project or your participation in it, please do not hesitate to contact me.

There are two copies of the consent form, one copy is for me to keep.

Appendix 7. Diary sample



A Day with WeChat

What happened	Comments and screenshots
<p>Entry 1:</p> <p>I reached out to my phone when I woke up, I checked the Moments and read some articles from the official accounts that I followed, it took about 15-20 minutes.</p>	<p>I don't know why I am doing it, it is out of habit, not by conscious choices. I feel happy I focused on reading in the morning and I knew what my friends are doing.</p>
<p>Entry 2:</p> <p>I replied to messages and 'liked' and commented on several images of my friends. I also participated in a group chat and grabbed lucky money in this WeChat group.</p>	<p>I enjoy connecting with my WeChat friends in different ways.</p>
<p>Entry 3:</p> <p>My friend and I decided to meet at the restaurant around 12.30pm, but I can't find her when I arrived. Rather than sending messages back and forth, I turned on WeChat's real time location feature, a map popped up, showing my friend exactly where I am.</p>	<p>I love this built-in location service, because it is hard for people to describe exactly where you are, especially for someone (like me) who has a terrible sense of direction. This feature is very convenient.</p>
<p>Entry 4:</p> <p>I had lunch with my friend at Home restaurant. It is a cash-only restaurant,</p>	<p>The restaurant also has WeChat QR codes embedded into their dashboards, but he opted to</p>

but we found that we did not have enough cash to cover the bill. I paid with WeChat wallet, the owner pulls out his phone and scans mine for the payment.

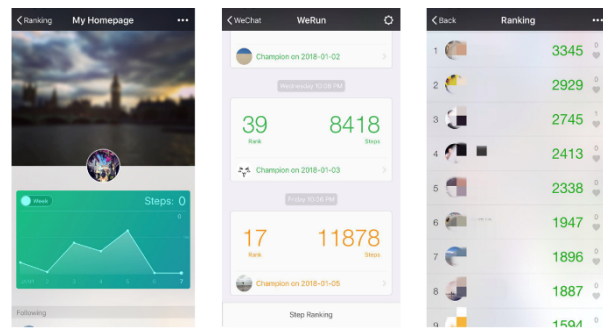
use his device. My friend sent me her share via WeChat wallet. I saw the restaurant has a special offer today: scan the restaurant's QR code and share it on WeChat moments to get 20% off. Of course, I can't say no to that. But I only made this post available to a few friends, because I didn't want all of my WeChat friends to know when and where I had lunch and who I had lunch with, though I do think the food is good and worth sharing with others.

What happened

Comments and screenshots

Entry 5:

When I got home, I checked WeRun on WeChat to track my daily footsteps, check how close I am to reaching my fitness goals and compete with my friends.



Entry 6:

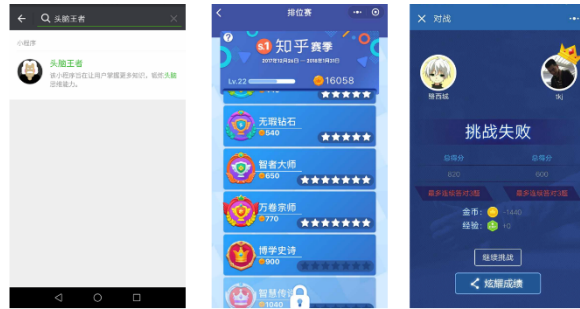
I listened to music on WeChat and sent one of my favourite songs to my Moments. I listened to music on WeChat because this newly released song is only available on WeChat (QQ music).

I really enjoyed the song because it has an infectious rhythm and I can draw similarities with the lyrics. I thought about posting what I think of and how I feel about the song to Moments, and then I noticed that there is a word limit to posts, I reviewed my comment again and again, I still didn't want to remove a character. I tried to share the music with a screenshot of my comments, but it didn't succeed. Thus, instead of writing a whole paragraph about my feelings and views about the music, I am just sharing the song.

Entry 7:

While waiting for the train/bus, I opened a mini-program on WeChat and played a game called *The king of Brain* which is recommended by one of my friend the other day.

I was just killing time. But I like using mini-programs on WeChat. They work as webapps, each page is downloaded on demand, and doesn't eat too much space.



Entry 8:

I checked WeChat most frequently during the night time once I have gotten everything I need to be done and I am just hanging out.

I love to do at the end of the day because I know my friends and family will post things on their Moments, I love to be up to date on seeing these.

* Please feel free to add additional boxes for more diary entries 😊

Appendix 7. Diary Template



A Day with WeChat

What happened	Comments and screenshots
Entry 1:	
Entry 2:	
Entry 3:	
Entry 4:	
Entry 5:	
Entry 6:	
Entry 7:	
Entry 8:	

* Please feel free to add additional boxes for more diary entries 😊

Appendix 7. Diary instructions

Guidelines For 'A Day with WeChat' Diary Completion

Thank you for agreeing to keep a diary to help me with my research. I am asking you to keep a diary of your activities on WeChat for one day. I would like to know when and how you use WeChat, and how you feel about your WeChat activities at the time they take place. The diary should ideally include all of your engagements with WeChat, but you can decide what to record and what to share with me.

How to keep this diary

Please try to fill in the diary EITHER every time you check in and do things on WeChat, OR by looking back over the day at the end of the day and recording all your engagements with WeChat, either in the form of texts or images such as screenshots.

You can keep the diary using a computer or on paper. Please not try to let the diary keeping influence your WeChat activities.

What to write in this diary

I would like to know about your activities on WeChat, your reasons for doing them and feelings about them. Please try to describe your activities in detail when completing your diary.

In the 'What happened' box, you can write about:

- what did you do?
- on what device did you do it?
- what did you use it for?
- when and where did you do it?

In the 'Comments and screenshot' box, you can include:

- how/why you decide to do this on/ through WeChat?
- how did you feel about the activity?
- what do you think about this service/function/feature?
- related screenshot (s)

Other important information

You and your diary entries will be kept anonymous and confidential in my research. The diary will be used as a part of my research data and as guidance for generating questions that might be asked during subsequent interviews. If there is any content that you would prefer not to be involved in the research data, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Ideally you would return the diary to me prior to the interview by provided email (jli141@sheffield.ac.uk) or meeting in person, there might be inconvenience when you are unwilling to do this, it is fine for you to bring it to the interview.

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions about your diary, please contact me.

If you know of anyone else who may be interested in taking part in the research, please pass on my contact details.

Appendix 8. Documents

Ref	Link	Category	Author	Last updated Date	Note
1	https://www.wechat.com/mobile/htdocs/en/service_terms.html	Official document (text)	WeChat	21/03/2018	WeChat Terms of Service
2	https://www.wechat.com/en/privacy_policy.html	Official document (text)	WeChat	03/09/2020	WeChat Privacy Policy
3	https://weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/readtemplate?lang=en&t=weixin_agreement&s=default&cc=CN	Official document (text)	WeChat	N/A	Agreement on software license and service of Tencent WeChat
4	https://www.wechat.com/mobile/htdocs/en/acceptable_use_policy.html	Official document (text)	WeChat	13/11/2015	WeChat-acceptable use policy
5	https://weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/readtemplate?lang=en&t=weixin_agreement&s=privacy&cc=CN	Official document (text)	WeChat	21/12/2018	WeChat privacy protection guideline
6	https://weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/readtemplate?lang=en_US&check=false&t=weixin_agreement&s=pay	Official document (text)	WeChat	N/A	WeChat payment system user service agreement
7	https://privacy.qq.com	Official document (text)	Tencent	21/09/2020	Tencent privacy policy

8	https://privacy.qq.com/advertisement.htm	Official document (text)	Tencent	21/09/2020	Tencent's Advertising Policy
9	https://www.tenpay.com/v3/helpcenter/show/privacy.shtml	Official document (text)	Tencent	31/10/2018	Tencent Pay privacy policy
10	https://blog.wechat.com/2016/01/27/wechat-about-wechat-5-red-packets-wechats-secret-weapon-in-payments/	WeChat official blog archive	WeChat	27/01/2016	WeChat Red Packets
11	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6NDfB0-Vek	Official document (video)	Tencent	24/07/2017	Sengyee Lau's speech at P&G Signal conference
12	https://edu.qq.com/a/20101223/000148.htm	Official document Tencent news	Tencent	22/12/2010	Infrastructural intention
13	https://cloud.tencent.com/developer/article/1065606	Official document Tencent news	Tencent	20/11/2014	WeChat positions itself as the 'connector of the internet', at the 2014 World Internet Conference
14	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7DSMm2lzKs	Official document (video)	Tencent	18/06/2015	Pony Ma's talk in HKU
15	https://v.qq.com/x/search/?q=张小龙演讲 2020&stag=9	Official document (video)	Tencent	09/01/2020	Comment on Allen Zhang's speech at WeChat event (2020)

16	https://ad.weixin.qq.com	Official document (text)	WeChat	N/A	WeChat ads guidelines
17	https://pay.weixin.qq.com/wiki/doc/apiv3/open/pay/chapter3_1_0.shtml	Official document (text)	WeChat	26/05/2020	WeChat Pay Score
18	https://tech.qq.com/original/tmtdecode/t544.html	Tencent technology blog	Tencent	28/01/2014	WeChat Red Packets
19	https://technode.com/2018/05/23/tencent-internet-of-platform/	News article	Tencent	23/05/2018	Pony Ma's speech at 2018 'Cloud + Future' summit
20	http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2018-01-15/docifyqrewi2341559.shtml	Tech Blog	Sina technology	15/01/2018	Allen Zhang's speech at WeChat event (2018)
21	https://36kr.com/p/5171436.html	Tech Blog	36kr	09/01/2019	Allen Zhang's speech at WeChat event (2019)
22	http://www.williamlong.info/archives/5063.html	Personal blog	William Long	12/08/2017	Why I don't like WeChat
23	http://www.williamlong.info/archives/5330.html	Personal blog	William Long	06/05/2018	Tencent had never have a dream
24	http://huyong.blog.caixin.com/archives/174351	Personal blog	Hu Yong	22/01/2018	Commentary on Allen Zhang's speech
25	http://huyong.blog.caixin.com/archives/153829	Personal blog	Hu Yong	17/11/2016	WeChat Red Packets

26	https://36kr.com/p/5172559.html	Tech Blog	36kr	16/01/2019	WeChat needs a Challenger
27	https://36kr.com/p/5174017.html	Tech Blog	36kr	25/01/2019	The relation chain of WeChat
28	https://36kr.com/p/5113084.html	Tech Blog	36kr	05/01/2018	WeChat Mini-programmes
29	https://www.36kr.com/p/1722380025857	Tech Blog	36kr	26/03/2018	Privacy Trade-off/Robin Li
30	https://www.huxiu.com/article/281034.html	Tech Blog	Huxiu	14/01/2019	The future 'social' in the age of WeChat
31	https://www.huxiu.com/article/282751.html	Tech Blog	Huxiu	24/01/2019	Data monopoly
32	https://www.huxiu.com/article/250446.html	Tech Blog	Huxiu	02/07/2018	Online shopping on WeChat
33	https://www.huxiu.com/article/359027.html	Tech Blog	Huxiu	26/05/2020	WeChat Payment
34	https://www.huxiu.com/article/283737.html	Tech Blog	Huxiu	02/02/2019	Grabbing WeChat Red Packets
35	https://www.zhitongcaijing.com/content/detail/211995.html	Tech Blog	Huxiu	17/06/2019	WeChat ecosystem
36	https://www.ifanr.com/624044	Tech Blog	ifaner	24/02/2016	WeChat Moments ads

37	https://wapbaike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=75a62f41e7ba71d3466e6cc1	Tech Blog	Ifanr	27/09/2017	WeChat Red Packets
38	http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-01/05/content_2800381.htm	Media coverage	The state council	05/01/2015	Social credit system
39	https://www.imd.org/research-knowledge/articles/whats-stopping-tencent-from-monetizing-wechat-in-the-most-obvious-way/	Media coverage	Research and Knowledge	05/2018	WeChat monetisation
40	https://www.geekpark.net/news/216788	Tech Blog	Geekpark	22/09/2016	WeChat mini-programmes
41	http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0328/c90000-9442509.html	News coverage	People's Daily	28/03/2018	Privacy Trade-off/Robin Li
42	http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/28/c_1122605705.htm	News coverage	XINHUA NET	28/03/2018	Privacy Trade-off/Robin Li
43	https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/chinese-web-users-not-interested-in-privacy-claims-baidu-head-robin-li-6fgt5xr9f	News coverage	The Times	27/03/2018	Privacy Trade-off/Robin Li
44	https://juejin.cn/post/6844903426673868814	Tech Blog	juejin	12/02/2016	WeChat Red Packets algorithms

45	https://technode.com/2017/01/27/hongbao-tactics-2017/	Tech Blog	Technode	27/01/2017	WeChat Red Packets
46	https://www.pingwest.com/a/43354	Tech Blog	Pingwest	21/01/2015	WeChat Moments ads
47	https://www.sohu.com/a/288089497_260616	Media coverage	The Paper	10/01/2019	WeChat Pay score
48	https://www.geekbench.com/blog/2017/12/iphone-performance-and-battery-age/	Tech Blog	John Poole	18/12/2017	iPhone performance and Battery age
49	https://support.apple.com/en-gb/HT208387	Apple official blog	Apple	28/12/2017	iPhone performance and Battery age
50	https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/magazine/why-apple-wants-to-bust-your-iphone.html	Media coverage	New York Times	29/10/2013	Apple and iPhone

