

Young Chinese WeChat Users' Brand-Following Behavior

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Abstract

Brand-following of consumers on social media constitutes an important return on investment (ROI) index in digital marketing. However, little is known to date regarding brand-following behaviors of young Chinese social media users on Chinese social media platforms, in addition to the factors associated with them. In this study, our in-depth interviews with 20 emerging adults who followed brands through WeChat indicated that materialistic values, brand-related peer communication, and parents' opinions regarding different product categories impact the brand-following behaviors of young consumers. The interviews also demonstrated that young people's brand-following affected their intentions to post brand-related messages that were pertinent to luxury brands. However, their purchase intentions were limited to the most affordable items from those luxury brands. In addition, they were less likely to repost brand information created and provided by marketers. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed herein, and suggestions for future research provided.

Perilaku Mengikuti Merek pada Pemuda Republik Rakyat Tiongkok Pengguna WeChat

Abstrak

Perilaku mengikuti merek tertentu pada konsumen di media sosial merupakan salah satu indeks penting laba atas investasi (*return on investment* atau ROI) di dunia pemasaran digital. Namun, hingga saat ini perilaku mengikuti merek pada kalangan pemuda Republik Rakyat Tiongkok pengguna platform media sosial Republik Rakyat Tiongkok masih sedikit diketahui, begitu juga halnya mengenai faktor-faktor yang terkait dengan perilaku ini. Pada studi ini, wawancara mendalam dilakukan pada 20 pemuda yang mengikuti merek-merek barang melalui WeChat. Hasil wawancara mengindikasikan bahwa nilai-nilai materialistis, komunikasi dengan teman sebaya terkait merek, dan pendapat orang tua mengenai berbagai kategori produk yang berbeda berdampak pada perilaku mengikuti merek dari konsumen muda. Hasil wawancara juga menunjukkan bahwa perilaku mengikuti merek juga mempengaruhi niat para pemuda tersebut untuk membuat pesan terkait merek-merek mewah di media sosialnya. Namun, niat membeli mereka terbatas pada barang-barang yang terjangkau dari merek-merek mewah tersebut. Selain itu, mereka kurang ingin mem-posting ulang informasi merek yang dibuat dan disediakan oleh para pemasar. Artikel ini membahas implikasi teoretis dan praktis, serta menyediakan saran penelitian selanjutnya.

Keywords: Social media, brand-following, young consumers, China

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1. Introduction

Brand pages on social media refer to specific profiles or social networking sites generated and managed by advertisers, with the aim of promoting brands and connecting with customers (Rosenthal & Brito, 2017). Consumers solidify their relationships with brands by

following those brand pages (Chu, Chen, & Sung, 2016). Brand-following is defined as consumers' subscriptions to brand pages (Vries, Gensler, & LeeFlang, 2012), and is treated as an indication of consumers' high level of interest in and engagement with a particular brand (Rosenthal & Brito, 2017). It thus represents an important return on investment (ROI)

index in social media marketing (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Nisar & Whitehead, 2016).

Following brands through brand pages is an important way in which consumers engage with brands in China (Dudarenok, 2018). According to *Marketing to China* (2017), Chinese consumers follow an average of eight brand pages, and 38% of these users make purchase decisions based on the suggestions provided by the brand pages. However, little is known regarding Chinese consumers' brand-following behaviors through brand pages and the factors associated with them. Therefore, this study explored the brand-following behaviors of young Chinese WeChat users, specifically examining: (1) how young WeChat users follow brands through brand pages; (2) how psychological (materialism) and social factors (peer communication and parental influence) affect their brand-following; and (3) how brand-following affects their intentions to post and repost brand-related messages and purchase the brands presented on brand pages. In this study, young WeChat users refer to emerging adults who follow brand pages on WeChat. We targeted young adults because they are the most active social media users in China (Kantar, 2017) and routinely engage in consumption activities through social media (WARC, 2017).

We focused on WeChat (*Weixin* in Chinese: 微信) because it is the most popular social media platform among young Chinese consumers (Tencent, 2018) and has, as of 2018, one billion active users monthly (Xinhuanet, 2018), more than 40% of whom are youths aged 18–25 years old (Tencent, 2018). These young users engage in WeChat to undertake various activities, such as sending messages, playing games, arranging audio/video meetings, and sharing photos or videos on *Friends' Circles* (a public space on WeChat that allows users to share their personal activities) (Chu, Lien, & Cao, 2018; Lien & Cao, 2014). WeChat usage is directly related to consumption and drove RMB 333.9 billion (US\$ 48.9 billion) worth of traditional consumption, comprising food, travel, and shopping (CAICT, 2018). The penetration rate of *WeChat Pay*, a payment system integrated into the WeChat app, is almost 100% among young users and is used for a wide range of consumption activities (CAICT, 2018).

We investigated psychological and social factors that were potential antecedents of young WeChat users' brand-following behaviors: Firstly, previous research has suggested that psychological factors, such as self-esteem, narcissism, and gratification, influence users' media consumption behaviors (Andreassen, Pallesen, & Griffiths, 2017; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Among various psychological factors, we examined the influence of materialism on young consumers' brand-following behaviors for the following reasons: (1) material goods are widely accepted as a means for achieving self-

expression in China (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998); (2) materialism is prevalent on Chinese social media (Wang, He, & Yin, 2016); and (3) young people's materialism has been found to be closely associated with their use of social media and attitudes toward social media advertising (Kamal, Chu, & Pedram, 2013).

Next, regarding social factors, consumer socialization theory suggests that young consumers acquire important consumption-related skills and knowledge through their interactions with socialization agents (Youn & Shin, 2019). We focused on the influence of two important socialization agents: peers and parents. In consumer socialization research, peer communication refers to peer interactions over products and services (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). A noteworthy aspect of peer communication among young consumers is that it often entails social comparisons (Chan & Prendergast, 2007). According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), people tend to evaluate their self-worth by comparing themselves with others, especially when objective standards for evaluation are not readily available. Social media such as WeChat provide youths with platforms for social comparisons, as the users of those media are exposed to huge amounts of information regarding the lives of others (Yang, Holden, & Carter, 2018). In addition, peer conformity is typically viewed as the overriding goal in collectivistic societies such as China (Men & Muralidharan, 2017). Thus, participation of young WeChat users in consumption-related activities, such as brand-following, is likely to be affected by peer communication.

With regard to the role of parents, research has suggested that parents affect young people's development of consumption-related attitudes and behaviors through communication, modeling, and reinforcement (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). Although young adults usually have significant freedom in decision making, they still show a strong and positive attachment to their parents (Arnett, 2007). In China, youths are generally expected to obey and respect their parents, in keeping with the conception of "filial piety" in Confucianism (Li, 2014). In addition, Chinese parents tend to provide financial support to their college-aged sons and daughters, ensuring that they retain the important influence on emerging adults' consumption-related attitudes and behaviors (Chen, 2013).

For assessment of potential outcomes of brand-following activities, we herein examined WeChat users' intentions to post and repost advertising messages, which represent consumers' eWOM activities, and also their purchase intentions for the advertised brands, as these outcomes are typically considered key metrics for gauging the effects and effectiveness of marketing communications in general and social media marketing in particular (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

Given that China has 1.7 billion active social media users (Statista, 2019) and that 69.4% of Chinese people aged 15–19 years and 77.3% of Chinese people aged 20–29 years use social media (Statista, 2017), China is a lucrative market for advertisers utilizing social media to target young consumers. Surprisingly, little is known to date regarding users' brand-following behaviors on Chinese social media platforms. While the population in China is highly penetrated with social media use, the mainstream social media platforms popular in the rest of the world (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, and YouTube) are blocked in China (Fu, 2018). Thus, marketers must rely on Chinese social media, such as WeChat, to reach and appeal to Chinese consumers (Lien & Cao, 2014). For the purpose of marketing communication tools, this requires marketers to be equipped with extensive knowledge of Chinese social media. By exploring the engagement in brand-following behaviors of young Chinese consumers on a major Chinese social media platform (WeChat) through in-depth interviews, this study aimed to provide a qualitative understanding of Chinese brand pages as advertising tools in China. Not only did this study investigate how young Chinese adults follow brands on WeChat, in order to provide a deeper understanding of how WeChat brand pages work, it also explored psychological (materialism) and social factors (peer communication and parental influence) as potential antecedents of brand-following behaviors. Additionally, our examination in the Chinese context of the outcomes of brand-following behaviors provides valuable practical implications for the targeting of young Chinese consumers by marketers who utilize social media.

2. Methods

A semi-structured interview guide was constructed based on our literature review of research into brand-following behaviors, materialism, peer communication, and parental influence. The interview encompassed five topics: (1) participants' attitudes toward brand pages and their brand-following behaviors; (2) materialistic values; (3) consumption-related peer communication; (4) parenting practices in relation to brand-following; and (5) the outcomes of brand-following behaviors (post, repost, and purchase intentions).

In-depth interviews were conducted in Mandarin with 20 WeChat users aged between 18 and 21 who followed brands on WeChat. The participants were undergraduate students recruited from a large university in Nanjing, China. Nanjing is the second largest city in East China and a center of Chinese economy, education, and culture. Most of the students at the university were active social media users. To recruit the respondents, one of the authors of this study contacted academic staff members at the university and asked them to recommend potential participants to take part in the

interviews. Then, the authors contacted the potential participants via email and telephone and asked them whether they were following brands on WeChat and were willing to participate in our study. Interviews were conducted in coffee shops near the university and were scheduled at the convenience of the participants. The duration of each interview was around one hour. Each interview was continued until enough data were collected and no new conceptions or insights could be generated. All interviews were audio-recorded, translated to English, and transcribed. The length of each transcript was around 1,600 English words.

The final sample consisted of six freshmen, three sophomores, five juniors, and six senior students. To represent diverse voices of brand followers, we purposely recruited equal numbers of male and female participants (10 males and 10 females), and lighter to heavier brand followers: five WeChat users who followed more than 15 brands; five users who followed 11–15 brands; five users who followed 5–10 brands; and five users who followed 1–4 brands.

The interviews were analyzed using a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), according to which the investigators listened to the recorded interviews, translated and transcribed the interviews into English, and read the transcribed interviews line by line. The investigators compared the different conceptions of informants, identified potential themes, went back to the transcription, and reassessed whether each theme was fully supported. Based on this process, themes were revised and re-organized corresponding to the five aforementioned main topics.

3. Results

Users' Attitudes toward Brand Pages and Their Brand-Following Behaviors. The WeChat users in this study followed diverse categories of brands, including cosmetics (e.g., YSL), clothing (e.g., Nike), luxury goods (e.g., Gucci, Chanel and Dior), foods (e.g., McDonald's), digital/tech (e.g., Apple), educational agencies (e.g., Mint Reading), fitness (e.g., Keep), and supermarkets (e.g., Suguo). Female informants were more interested in makeup brands (e.g., Estee Lauder), luxury handbags (e.g., Hermes and Louis Vuitton), and Western restaurants (e.g., Starbucks), whereas males were interested in sportswear brands, especially footwear (e.g., Nike and Converse), as well as digital device (e.g., Apple and Nikon) brands. All informants indicated that they view at least one brand page per day. Heavier brand followers were more likely to follow expensive brands, such as luxury handbags and designers' brands, whereas lighter brand followers were more likely to follow affordable brands including those for supermarkets and restaurants. Senior students were particularly

interested in following the brands of agencies of English learning and study abroad. However, there was no notable difference in the categories of brands followed by freshmen, sophomores, and juniors.

The informants tended to view brand pages as useful information sources. They learned how to use the products in creative ways through brand pages (e.g., “how to use an Apple smartphone to draw a picture” and “how to match their clothes and make them look fashionable”). Some of them were emotionally attached to brands and wanted more information about those brands and their products, as is illustrated by the following comment by an informant:

“I have always followed a brand page because I love the brand. For example, I like the design and style of AF (a fashionable clothing brand). I want to know much more about it and so I follow its brand page.” (Female, junior, following more than 15 brands)

Although the informants in general were interested in brand pages, many of them complained about brand pages for various reasons. Most of them felt that the content was uninteresting and lacked creativity. An informant revealed:

“I don’t have a particular brand page that I like. I feel that they are all similar. The design of the page is not attractive and usually just has the introduction of products and some photos of the model.” (Male, senior, following 1–4 brands)

It is noteworthy that many informants consider the content of the brand pages on WeChat as less appealing than those they see on other platforms, noting that other social media platforms, such as *Weibo* (an information-based platform), *Little Red Book* (a social e-commerce platform), and *Douyin* (a short video platform), provide more interesting brand information than WeChat. More importantly, the informants feel that the content of many international brands on WeChat is not suitable for Chinese consumers. One informant described:

“On the brand page of Shiseido, I can select one photo of their models and try the color of lipsticks on their faces. However, I found nearly all their models are foreigners and the only Asian model’s appearance is quite different from me. How can I try these lipsticks on their faces? I don’t know how it would look on my face.” (Female, sophomore, following more than 15 brands)

However, the WeChat users did acknowledge frequently going back to WeChat and discussing brand information

with close friends, after viewing brand messages on other social media platforms. This may reflect the fact that WeChat, a relationship-based social media platform, plays an important role in sharing and exchanging brand information among close friends, and offers potential opportunities for generating word-of-mouth.

Overall, the informants showed strong interest in following brands on social media. They followed various categories of brands pages to fulfill both utilitarian and hedonic requirements. Although the users were unhappy about the limited creativity of brand messages and the less suitable content for the Chinese market presented on brand pages, WeChat plays a critical role in the process of obtaining and exchanging brand information.

Materialism and Brand-Following Behaviors.

According to Richins and Dawson (1992), materialism consists of three components: (1) acquisition centrality; (2) acquisition as the pursuit of happiness; and (3) possession-defined success. Acquisition centrality is defined as the tendency to value possessions and acquisitions above other personal life goals. Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness is the belief that material goods are essential to wellbeing and happiness. Possession-defined success describes the evaluation and judgment of people based on the number and quality of their material possessions. The informants’ perceptions of material goods reflect these components of materialism. For example, the informants acknowledged holding the belief that material possessions can reflect individuals’ success and bring happiness and contribute to a higher quality life, and some pointed out that the accumulation of material goods represented one of their most important life goals. Most of the informants said that they pay close attention to the consumption- or brand-related content generated by their classmates or close friends on WeChat, e.g., “a classmate received a Chanel handbag as a gift for Valentine’s day” (female, junior, following 5–10 brands). Although middle-class individuals are heavy consumers of luxury goods in China, it is still difficult for university students to purchase them. Hence, those who participated in this study tended to follow many luxury brands to satisfy their desire for material possessions and to relieve the anxiety that resulted from wealthier classmates. An informant who enjoyed others’ admiration when she bought a new luxury handbag revealed:

“You know, luxury goods are rather expensive. I am a student and can’t afford many luxury goods. I always buy some affordable brands but follow luxury brands on WeChat. Following brands does not require money. It looks like I plan to buy or have owned these luxury goods. It is not the reality, but I don’t care.” (Female, senior, following more than 15 brands)

Brand-following behaviors are also employed to satisfy the sense of belonging and for the respondents to identify themselves as members of a certain social group, especially some communities on WeChat. Community members follow similar brands and view the brands as the representation of group identity. One informant believed that luxury brands are a “must-have” and that the material goods made him feel safe:

“I participate in a small community consisting of only four people. We have the same fashion tastes and follow some unique and niche designer brands, such as Dolce & Gabbana, Off White, and Jimmy Choo. We always exchange ideas on brands and products, while we do not want to talk with classmates who cannot understand these brands.” (Male, freshman, following more than 15 brands)

According to some young adult participants, excessive consumption-related content on WeChat brand pages can cause dissatisfaction and have a negative impact on their intention to follow the brands. Many informants feel that exceedingly consumption-related information is “boring,” and they reported having little interest in following some luxury brands that are too prevalent on social media. The following are the words of an informant who acknowledged that he always feels stress when meeting with people who have luxury brands: *“Many friends buy shoes from Balenciaga and show off them on WeChat. Their shoes look ugly, so I do not want to follow this brand”* (male, senior, following 5–10 brands). However, some informants also indicated that their brand attitudes depended largely on those who wear or use the products. For example, if group members with whom an individual had a good relationship wore a certain brand, the person may have changed her or his mind about the brand.

Overall, materialism exerts an important influence on the informants’ brand-following behaviors. Materialistic young adults were likely to follow luxury brands to satisfy their vanities. Specifically, they tended to follow luxury brands to bolster self-concept and create a wealthy self-image. Additionally, they were interested in following premium brands because they wanted to position themselves in a community and make connections with wealthy group members.

Peer Communication and Brand-Following Behaviors.

The interviewees preferred to engage in brand- and product-related peer communication in smaller social media communities comprising of close friends and classmates, rather than in larger communities with weak social ties. The informants also indicated that their consumption-decisions were more likely to be influenced by what was discussed and shared in smaller communities than in larger ones.

Peer communication influences young adults’ brand-following behaviors through upward social comparison, which refers to the tendency of people to compare themselves to those who are better than them when evaluating themselves (Collins, 1996). Many informants acknowledged that they were likely to compare themselves to their friends who were similar in age but richer, more beautiful, or more professional in a specific field than they were; therefore, unconsciously or consciously, they followed brands that were used or preferred by “better” friends.

“I like to go to the gym. I have a good friend who is also a gym rat and more professional than me. He is in shape and has wonderful muscles. We discuss brands of protein powders and other supplements. He recommended a brand of ‘muscle technology’ which has a good taste and is beneficial for muscle growth. I began to follow it on WeChat, hoping to get more information.” (Male, senior, following 11–15 brands)

On the other hand, downward peer comparison (i.e., comparing themselves to those who are worse off) plays a less important role in their brand-following behaviors. Informants indicated that the brand choices of someone whom they viewed as lower in status than themselves would not increase their intentions to follow brands. An informant expressed the following opinion:

“My classmate who has lower grades always buys clothes of a certain fashion brand. She has a bad taste because these clothes look ugly. I do not want to follow this brand and know more about it. However, if someone I like wears these clothes, I may change my attitudes. It depends on who wears these clothes.” (Female, senior, following more than 15 brands)

In sum, peer communication appears to affect WeChat users’ brand-following behaviors. Peer influence is stronger in smaller communities with close ties than in bigger communities with weak ties. The young adults actively discussed brand information with close friends in smaller communities and compared their brand choices among themselves. Peer-to-peer communication regarding brands on social media leads to social comparison, which is in line with what social comparison theory suggests (Festinger, 1954). Upward social comparison is more prevalent than downward social comparison. Peers who have a better living standard, appearance, and professional level tend to have greater influence on young social media users’ intentions to follow brands, as compared to those who are deemed “inferior.”

Parental Influence and Brand-Following Behaviors.

Parents of the informants do not exert much control

over the young adults' brand-related behaviors. Many informants claimed that they follow whatever brands they liked, including foods, cosmetics, clothing, and digital products. However, some of the informants indicated that their parents influence the *categories* of brands that they follow on WeChat. Parents encourage the young WeChat users to follow brands that are beneficial for education and health. For example, many brands related to English learning (e.g., Mint Reading), and education agencies (e.g., Xindongfang), and fitness (e.g., Keep) are recommended by parents, as illustrated by an informant:

"My mother wishes that I improve my English and study overseas for my Master's degree. So, I follow some English learning brands recommended by my mother, such as Mint Reading and Baicizhan. There, I can enrich my vocabulary and read articles in English. These brand pages can record my study achievements, for example, "I spent two hours on Mint Reading today and learned 50 new words." I post these achievements on WeChat, and my mother can find out what I do every day. She is very interested in this content that I generate." (Female, Freshman, following 11–15 brands)

On the other hand, respondents reported that their parents often express negative perceptions regarding certain product categories to their young adult children. An informant stated, *"My mother always complains that I spend too much money. She doesn't like me paying attention to luxury brands and following them"* (female, freshman, following more than 15 brands). Another informant (male, freshman, following 11–14 brands) described the following: *"My parents were concerned that I might be associated with deviant friends when playing video games or drinking in a bar. So, I try to avoid following some brands of video games or bars."* Some young adults indicated that they would not follow these brands on social media due to their parents' concerns about the aforementioned product categories. However, others admitted that they follow brand pages promoting those categories and *"blocked their parents when posting brand-related content on WeChat"* (male, freshman, following 5–10 brands).

Interestingly, parents sometimes seek their adult children's input. According to Grossbart, Hughes, Pryor, and Yost (2002), young people can influence and change their parents' attitudes and behaviors, especially when the young possess new knowledge and skills that parents have not obtained. In socialization research, this "bottom-up" socialization from children to parents is known as *reverse socialization*, which is defined as the process by which younger people influence older people's social knowledge and skills (Correa, Staubhaar, Chen, & Spence, 2015; Randall, Pauley, &

Culley, 2015). Our findings demonstrate that this reverse socialization takes place between young WeChat users and their parents. Informants indicated that their parents ask for their brand recommendations, thereafter searching brand messages or product information on brand pages. Female informants are more likely to discuss cosmetic brands with their mothers and recommend brand pages to the mothers, while male informants tend to suggest brand pages of digital products and cars to their parents. However, some informants indicated that it is difficult to find suitable products for parents because brand pages are designed predominantly for young consumers.

In summary, while parents do not exert direct control over their adult children's brand-following behaviors, they affect their children by expressing their opinions and "nudging" them to consider specific categories. While some informants actively "block" parents' interventions, the majority appear to be receptive to parents' expectations. Parents are also willing to learn about brands from their children, and brand pages can be important information sources for young WeChat users to pass along to their parents, although most brand pages target younger generations, making it challenging to find appropriate information for their parents' generation.

Brand Follower's Posting, Reposting, and Purchasing Intentions. Regarding the brand-followers' intentions to post brand-related content on WeChat, the interviews revealed that the informants want to post brand messages to attract friends' attention and showcase their brand tastes and economic capacity. They prefer to post expensive brands, products, and services, and are less inclined to share information about brands that are low priced, such as affordable restaurants and supermarkets. They generally acknowledged that their posting of brand-related messages might be considered "showing off." Thus, they often aim to take a more nuanced approach when they post a brand message, as illustrated by the informants below:

"I always post brand information; however, I do not say that directly. If I buy a new lipstick from Chanel, I will use it and post a selfie on WeChat. My friends can notice my new lip color. If I buy a new luxury handbag, I always take a photo of my desk and comment: I am very busy today. The point is that my new handbag is in the corner of the desk." (Female, freshman, following 11–15 brands)

"I have never said I had an expensive dinner in a French restaurant. I just took selfies when having dinner and showed the location on this content. I know my friends can notice this location." (Male, freshman, following 5–10 brands)

As for the WeChat users' intentions to repost brand information or links generated by marketers after following brands on WeChat, the interviews indicated that users are not very enthusiastic about reposting behaviors. They viewed reposting as repeating others' ideas instead of expressing their own attitudes. A few informants shared that they had engaged in reposting behavior to get discounts from marketers. However, they deleted the content shortly after getting the desired discount.

With regard to purchase intentions, participants were interested in purchasing most of the brands they followed, including snacks, affordable restaurants, and skin care products. In addition, many of the informants wanted to buy affordable items promoted by luxury brands. They indicated that most of the products of the brands they follow are primarily on their dream lists. However, as college students, they have limited economic capacity, and their purchase intentions largely depend on the price of the products. Hence, they intended to purchase less expensive items from the first-tier brands that they followed. In other words, while they followed brands promoting expensive items, they ultimately purchased the most affordable items from those brands, as stated by an informant:

"I always buy foundations and lipsticks from Dior and Chanel after following them. These items are cheap, but they are first-tier luxury brands. I cannot afford the handbags of Dior, but cosmetics are okay. I also like the handbags of Charles Keith, which belongs to Louis Vuitton."
(Female, senior, following 11–15 brands)

Overall, young adults' intentions to engage in brand eWOM (posting and reposting), and their intentions to purchase the products featured on brand pages, revealed interesting insights. Although they are inclined to post brand messages associated with luxury goods in order to draw their peers' attention and showcase their tastes, their actual purchase behaviors tended to focus on affordable brands and cheaper alternatives due to their limited budget.

4. Discussion

WeChat is a leading social media platform in China, and brand pages on WeChat are crucial tools for marketers to reach out to young consumers there. However, little is known about young WeChat users' brand-following behaviors. Using a qualitative method, this study examined how and why young Chinese WeChat users follow brands and its outcomes.

Several key findings emerged from this study. Firstly, findings suggest that brands utilizing WeChat pages do not satisfy brand followers' esthetic needs. The users in

this study feel that the content provided by WeChat brand pages is neither creative nor interesting and, thus, they often explored other social media platforms to engage with brand messages. The fact that the users often return to WeChat to discuss brands with their peers might be reassuring for marketers relying on WeChat as an advertising channel. However, given that the entertainment value derived from social media advertisements, as compared to the informational value, is more likely to elicit positive attitudes toward the advertisements, especially among younger consumers (Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton, 2011), advertisers utilizing WeChat brand pages to target youths need to make efforts to make their brand content more entertaining and interesting to that particular audience.

Secondly, this study examined three psychological and social factors (materialism, peer communication, and parenting practices) in relation to WeChat users' brand-following behavior. Results suggest that all three factors affect brand-following behaviors among young WeChat users, but in different ways. Regarding materialism, previous research has suggested that materialistic individuals tend to spend more time on social media and pay closer attention to consumption-related content generated by friends (Chu et al., 2016). However, little is known about the relationship between materialism and brand-following behaviors. This study adds new knowledge to the literature by showing that materialistic values are widespread among WeChat brand followers. They follow luxury goods to bolster self-concept and to build a favorable self-image. Brand-following is utilized as a convenient means of participating in luxury consumption.

As for peer communication, this study demonstrates that, while brand-related peer communication is prevailing on WeChat, peer influence is stronger in smaller communities than in larger ones. From a cultural perspective, Chinese social media use reflects traditional values toward social relationships. Chinese individuals tend to prefer small close-knit trusted networks (Holmes, Balnaves, & Wang, 2015). This might explain why young adults are less active in bigger communities than in smaller ones, and are less likely to be influenced by the members of those communities.

In peer-to-peer communication related to brands on social media, upward social comparison is more prevalent than downward social comparison. Prior research has found that upward social comparison on social networking sites tends to lead to depressive symptoms and low self-esteem in young Chinese (Liu et al., 2017). Given that materialism is also known to have similar impacts on youths, young people's brand-following through social media and its consequences requires further attention from scholars as well as stakeholders involved in the wellbeing of youth.

While little attention has been given to the roles of parents in the behaviors of young adult consumers, this study demonstrates that parental influence remains important for emerging adults in the Chinese context. Although respondents reported that their Chinese parents do not actively exert control over their social media use, parents can nevertheless affect the youth's brand-following behaviors by expressing their opinions about different product categories. Our findings highlight the unique roles that parents play in young social media users' brand-related behaviors in China, and they provide a reason for marketers who target Chinese youths to consider parents as important stakeholders.

Our findings also reveal some interplay among the antecedents. Regarding the relationship between materialism and peer communication, we found that consumption-related peer communication on WeChat is closely related to upward social comparison, leading young consumers to compare themselves to those with a better living standard, and pay close attention to what those "better" friends possess and post. Previous research has suggested that Chinese youths who communicate frequently with friends about consumption tend to engage in social comparison (Chan & Prendergast, 2008). In addition, young people who compare material goods to peers are more likely to be materialistic (Chan & Prendergast, 2008). Our findings are in line with what prior research has demonstrated, highlighting the interplay of materialism and peer communication. Materialistic values induced by consumption-related peer communication, however, can be curbed by parents (Ho, Shin, & Lwin, 2017). Our findings indicate that parents tend to express negative perceptions regarding their adult children's engagement in luxury brand pages and nudge them to follow brands that are beneficial for health and education.

Regarding the outcomes of brand-following, our findings reveal that brand followers on WeChat do intend to post brand-related content. Young consumers who follow brands, especially luxury goods or premium products on WeChat, intend to post original content that showcases their brand preferences. This finding corroborates those of prior studies that demonstrated a positive relationship between brand-following behaviors and intention to post on social media (Chu et al., 2016; Lien & Cao, 2014). However, this study suggests that young brand followers are less likely to repost brand-related information provided by marketers. The potential explanation for this finding is that many among the younger Chinese generations have an elevated sense of individualism (Chu et al., 2018), which leads to an intention to post original content instead of repeating the messages of marketers.

The findings from this study also suggest that young adults desire to purchase the brands they follow on

WeChat. This finding corroborates earlier evidence (e.g., Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012) demonstrating a positive association between WeChat users' brand-related communication and their purchase intentions. Due to their limited consumption capacity, young consumers are likely to buy affordable sub-brands or more affordable items from first-tier luxury brands, which creates a gap between what they post and what they (intend to) buy.

5. Conclusion

This study fills the gap in the literature by providing a qualitative understanding of young WeChat users' perceptions of brand-following behaviors, the roles of psychological (materialistic attitudes) and social factors (peer communication and parental influence) in brand-following, and the impact of brand-following on their willingness to post and report brand messages and purchase the advertised brands. Examining both antecedents and consequences of brand-following behaviors through in-depth interviews with young brand followers residing in China, this study provides comprehensive insights into an understudied but important topic: young Chinese social media users' attitudes toward, and responses to, brand messages delivered through Chinese social media.

This study affords practical implications. Firstly, the study results show that young consumers are not impressed with the creativity of brand messages presented on WeChat brand pages. Marketers utilizing WeChat need to find ways to provide more original and intriguing marketing communication content to hold young consumers' attention. Secondly, this study demonstrates that peer communication in smaller communities is closely related to brand-following behaviors. Hence, marketers should focus on developing relationships with smaller communities rather than targeting larger brand communities. Finally, although it is often assumed that parents have less influence on young adults, our study results show that parents do affect young adults' brand-following behaviors in China. We suggest advertisers re-assess the role of parents in young Chinese's consumption-related behaviors and incorporate parents' views in the development of marketing strategies targeting youths in China.

This study has limitations. Firstly, this is a qualitative study that explored the topic of how and why young adults follow brands on social media in a Chinese context. The findings may not be generalizable to all WeChat users. Thus, future research should focus on a wider number of WeChat users and consider conducting quantitative research (e.g., surveys) to assess the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, as this study focused specifically on young adults using WeChat, caution should be exercised when projecting the results

from this study to different populations and media contexts. Future research is encouraged to explore a broader range of age groups, such as children and teenagers who are also actively engaged in social media and consumption activities. We also suggest that future research consider other social media sites popular in China, such as Sina Weibo and Douyin. In addition, this study examined materialism as an antecedent to brand-following behaviors. However, prior research suggests that materialism can also be considered an outcome of young people's consumption-related social media use (Ho et al., 2017). Future research should pay closer attention to the interplay between materialism and consumption-related social media use, such as brand-following, instead of assuming a unidirectional relationship between these. Lastly, it appears that young WeChat users' following of luxury brands is related to both materialism and peer communication. This seems to suggest that there is a close relationship between materialism and peer communication. However, this study did not investigate this suggested relationship. New research might explore the relationships among the factors that were examined as antecedents in this study (materialism, peer communication, and parental influence).

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