USES AND GRATIFICATIONS OF WECHAT AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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I hereby declare that the material in this thesis is my own except for quotations, equations, summaries, and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to investigate Chinese adolescents' uses and gratifications of WeChat, along with their intention to continue using the app. Despite past research on mobile instant messenger adoption, there is a knowledge gap concerning the gratifications influencing post-adoption behavior, that is continuance intention, among specific demographics like Chinese adolescents. The current study distinguishes between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained and examines how these gratifications may affect the intention to continue using mobile instant messenger among Chinese adolescents, thereby contributing to the existing literature by filling in the gaps. Based on a quantitative approach incorporating Uses and Gratifications Theory and Theory of Planned Behavior, a large-scale survey (N=1087) among Chinese adolescents aged 10-24 was conducted. After examining the quantitative data, the author identified the gratifications Chinese adolescents sought and obtained from using WeChat. According to the results of the quantitative analysis, Chinese adolescents obtained more gratifications than what they initially sought or their gratifications obtained were in line with their initial expectations. The gratifications sought, gratifications obtained, attitude, and intention to continue using WeChat among Chinese adolescents were observed to vary based on their demographic characteristics. The findings derived from the quantitative analysis suggest that Chinese adolescents will continue using WeChat. The quantitative analysis predicts that convenience gratification sought and obtained, media appeal gratification sought, and attitude exert a considerable positive effect on the intention to continue using the app. However, entertainment gratification obtained is expected to have a negative impact. The present study has significant theoretical as well as practical implications. This study uncovers diverse gratifications sought and obtained by Chinese adolescents from using WeChat. By uniquely combing the attitude construct from the Theory of Planned Behavior with Uses and Gratifications Theory, it offers a fresh framework for analyzing social media use and user retention, potentially advancing theoretical discussions. It highlights demographic variations in gratifications sought, gratifications obtained, attitude, and continuance intention, emphasizing the need for individual differences in media studies. A notable discovery is the unexpected negative impact of entertainment gratification obtained on continuance intention, a revelation that defies conventional wisdom and deepens our grasp of user motivation. The research provides crucial insights into the uses and gratifications of Chinese adolescent WeChat users as well as their continuance intention, which can inform platform designers, marketers and advertisers, policymakers, parents and guardians, as well as future researchers.

ABSTRAK

KEGUNAAN DAN KEBERUNTUNGAN WECHAT DALAM KALANGAN REMAJA DI REPUBLIK RAKYAT CHINA

Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk menyiasat penggunaan dan kepuasan yang diperoleh oleh remaja China dari WeChat, serta niat mereka untuk terus menggunakan aplikasi tersebut. Walaupun terdapat kajian lepas tentang penggunaan aplikasi pesanan segera mobile, masih terdapat kekurangan pengetahuan mengenai kepuasan yang mempengaruhi perilaku pasca-adopsi, iaitu niat untuk terus menggunakan, dalam kalangan demografi tertentu seperti remaja China. Kajian ini membezakan antara kepuasan yang dicari dan kepuasan yang diperolehi, serta menyiasat bagaimana kepuasan ini mungkin mempengaruhi niat untuk terus menggunakan aplikasi pesanan segera mobile di kalangan remaja China, dengan itu memberikan sumbangan kepada literatur sedia ada dengan mengisi jurang pengetahuan. Berdasarkan pendekatan kuantitatif yang menggabungkan teori Penggunaan dan Kepuasan serta teori Perilaku yang Dirancang, tinjauan berskala besar (N=1087) di kalangan remaja China berumur 10-24 tahun telah dijalankan. Setelah memeriksa data kuantitatif, penulis mengenal pasti kepuasan yang dicari dan diperolehi oleh remaja China dari penggunaan WeChat. Menurut hasil analisis kuantitatif, remaja China mendapatkan lebih banyak kepuasan daripada yang mereka cari pada mulanya atau kepuasan yang mereka perolehi adalah sejajar dengan harapan awal mereka. Kepuasan yang dicari, kepuasan yang diperolehi, sikap, dan niat untuk terus menggunakan WeChat di kalangan remaja China didapati berbeza berdasarkan ciri-ciri demografi mereka. Penemuan yang diperolehi dari analisis kuantitatif menunjukkan bahawa remaja China akan terus menggunakan WeChat. Analisis kuantitatif meramalkan bahawa kepuasan kemudahan yang dicari dan diperolehi, kepuasan tarikan media yang dicari, dan sikap memiliki pengaruh positif yang besar terhadap niat untuk terus menggunakan aplikasi. Walau bagaimanapun, kepuasan hiburan yang diperolehi dijangka mempunyai impak negatif. Kajian ini mempunyai implikasi teori dan praktikal yang signifikan. Kajian ini mengungkap pelbagai kepuasan yang dicari dan diperolehi oleh remaja China dari penggunaan WeChat. Dengan menggabungkan konstruk sikap dari teori Perilaku yang Dirancang dengan teori Penggunaan dan Kepuasan dengan unik, ia menawarkan kerangka baru untuk menganalisis penggunaan media sosial dan pengekalan pengguna, yang berpotensi memajukan diskusi teoretikal. Ia menonjolkan variasi demografi dalam kepuasan yang dicari, kepuasan yang diperolehi, sikap, dan niat untuk terus menggunakan, menekankan keperluan untuk perbezaan individu dalam kajian media. Satu penemuan penting adalah impak negatif yang tidak dijangka dari kepuasan hiburan yang diperolehi terhadap niat untuk terus menggunakan, suatu penyingkapan yang menentang hikmat konvensional dan mendalamkan pemahaman kita tentang motivasi pengguna. Kajian ini memberikan pandangan penting mengenai penggunaan dan kepuasan pengguna remaja China WeChat serta niat mereka untuk meneruskan penggunaan, yang boleh memberi maklumat kepada mereka yang merancang platform, pemasar dan pengiklan, pembuat polisi, ibu bapa dan penjaga, serta penyelidik masa depan.

LIST OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MIM	-	Mobile Instant Messenger
UGT	-	Uses and Gratifications Theory
TPB	-	Theory of Planned Behaviour
GS	-	Gratifications Sought
CGS	-	Content Gratification Sought
SGS	-	Social Gratification Sought
PGS	-	Process Gratification Sought
TGS	-	Technology Gratification Sought
GO	-	Gratifications Obtained
CGO	-	Content Gratification Obtained
SGO	-	Social Gratification Obtained
PGO	-	Process Gratification Obtained
TGO	-	Technology Gratification Obtained
CI	-	Continuance Intention
ATT	-	Attitude
SN	-	Subjective Norm
PBC	-	Perceived Behavioral Control
IS	-	Information Sharing
SD	-	Self-documentation
SE	-	Self-expression
SI	-	Social Interaction
ENT	-	Entertainment
PT	-	Passing Time
CON	-	Convenience
MA	-	Media Appeal
SP	-	Social Presence

LIST OF APPENDICES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

According to Statista (Thomala, 2023), the number of active accounts on Tencent's WeChat has consistently been on the rise. WeChat, one of the most popular mobile instant messenger (MIM) apps globally, boasting 1.3 billion monthly active members as of June 2023, placing it fifth in terms of active users globally.

WeChat has grown in popularity in recent years and has dramatically impacted people's lives (Gan & Wang, 2015). Tencent's WeChat, introduced in 2011, offers a number of services for people and businesses, incorporating instant messaging, voice communication and social networking services. Although WeChat has a large user base and a rapidly developing market, due to the availability of comparable software in China, the service provider, Tencent, nevertheless faces fierce competition in terms of long-term user retention.

WeChat's multifunctional platform combines multiple features including text messaging, socialization, mobile payments, et al., and it is constantly expanding its functions with new features like integrated city services, through which users in China's major cities can book transportation and even pay traffic fines. WeChat's primary functionalities include short messaging, and sharing of images and videos through the Moments feature. In accordance with WhatsApp's features, its Chinese equivalent provides free video and audio call services, as well as a huge variety of emoticons to express the emotional state of users. When users follow multiple public accounts on WeChat, they may get a wide range of information. As a matter of fact, an increasing number of businesses, colleges, and governments are utilizing WeChat

public accounts as a platform to deliver information to targeted people and communicate with them.

Although the number of WeChat users proliferated initially, the rate of growth has decreased in recent years (Shewale, 2023). How to keep users engaged and grow their loyalty has become a hot issue in academia. According to American consumer research expert Fishbein (1977) and others, users' continued usage behavior cannot be objectively detected, but users' continuous usage intention may be studied. The roles of various gratifications in predicting continuity may vary in distinct study circumstances, according to Chinese academics Gan and Li (2018). However, little consideration has been given to the effect of gratifications on the sustained usage of WeChat.

As early adopters of the Internet, adolescents' studies, social lives, and so on are all inextricably linked to the Internet. WeChat has become an essential instrument for adolescents' social connection and has a critical influence on their social behaviors as their Internet usage in their academics and lives has deepened. WeChat, China's most popular MIM app, has been effectively incorporated into many aspects of adolescents' academics and lives, allowing it to suit the personalized demands of today's Chinese adolescents. Smart phones and mobile broadband have increased MIM's competitiveness as a viable alternative to traditional short message services (Ha et al., 2015). MIM has become a platform for leisure, business, and work due to the advancements in mobile communications (Wu & Lu, 2013). MIM apps connect multiple services on one single platform utilizing network impact, mobility, and universality. Users may utilize MIM to keep information updated in real-time wherever and whenever they want. As MIM differs from other services on line (Ogara et al., 2014; Schneider & Goto-Jones, 2014), variables affecting users' willingness to continue to use MIM, may be different from the previously researched technologies, thus it should be investigated in detail. Competition is quite strong in the MIM sector, with numerous apps currently on the market and new apps being launched all the time. Attracting new audience is easier than maintaining existing users (Chang et al., 2014), since people are constantly eager to explore new technologies and products. However, stopping current users from switching to different MIM apps thus leaving the original one behind is considered a difficult challenge. The same features shared

2

by all MIM apps significantly lower users' switching costs, making the task more difficult (Deng et al., 2010; Zhou & Lu, 2011). As a result, MIM service suppliers must identify the variables that impact users' sustained usage desires to develop successful strategies to enhance users' CI to use MIM. Oghuma et al. (2016) claim the strong competition in the MIM market highlights the importance of continued usage of MIM in order for service providers to expand sustainably.

Both uses and gratifications theory (UGT) and the theory of planned behavior (TPB) serve as guiding principles in the current study. The author will explore the gratifications sought (GS), gratifications obtained (GO), the discrepancies between GO and GS from WeChat usage, demographic differences among Chinese adolescent WeChat users in terms of GS, GO, attitude (ATT), and continuance intention (CI), as well as Chinese adolescent users' CI towards WeChat, and factors influencing their CI.

1.2   Background of the Study

1.2.1   Review of Previous MIM Studies Related to the Present Research

Adolescents today are characterized by the use of technologies in every aspect of their lives (Margaryan et al., 2011; Selwyn & Grant, 2009). The total Internet usage time every day averages 5.9 hours in China, 6.4 hours in Singapore and the USA, and 8.5 hours in the Philippines. It's not just that adolescents spend a lot of time on the Internet, but their ways of accessing it have evolved as well. Approximately 99% of the world's population has mobile connectivity, and mobile device usage constitutes around 40% of the total global Internet traffic (Kemp, 2019). As per data published by Statista, more than 5 billion people were using the Internet at the end of April 2022, which accounts for 63.1% of the world's population. There were 4.7 billion social media users in the world, which represents 59% of the population (Statista, 2022).

Mobile technology has also shifted the communication preferences of adolescents, with mobile text messages now outnumbering in-person, telephone, and e-mail interactions as the most prevalent mode of communication (Lenhart et al.,