Why Chinese travelers use WeChat to make hotel choice decisions: A uses and gratifications theory perspective

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Why Chinese travelers use WeChat to make hotel choice decisions: A uses and gratifications theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

WeChat, a Chinese multi-purpose messaging, social media, and mobile payment app, is an emerging social media platform that has been integrated into the daily lives of Chinese people, including travel. However, despite the growing proliferation of WeChat, surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat in travel-related decision-making. Adopting (utilizing) the well ground concept of Uses and Gratifications theory (UGT), this exploratory work aims to address this void in prior literature and identify why and how Chinese young travelers use WeChat to make hotel choice decisions. Findings stemmed from the semi-structured interviews using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling approaches with eighteen WeChat users reveal that hotel choice decisions through WeChat are influenced by a combination of social, process, and content gratifications. As indicated in our findings, hotels in China should be aware of gratifications obtained by travelers in stimulating them to utilize WeChat in the hotel selection process. Further, our work contributes to extant UGT literature by emphasizing that it has specific relevance and should be given more prominence within tourism and hospitality, and social media literature.

Keywords: *Uses and gratifications theory, User-generated content, WeChat, Hotel choice decision, China*

INTRODUCTION

Following the rapid and vast adoption of the Internet and its latest developments, social media, with its participative, interactive, and user-centric nature, has influenced firms of all sizes in every

industry (Kapoor et al., 2017; Li et al., 2021) and the tourism and hospitality industry is not an exception (Leung et al., 2019; Oliveira et al. 2020; Valeri & Baggio, 2021). Prior research shows that social media platforms play an undeniably significant role in many aspects of the tourism and hospitality industry, including guest satisfaction and process improvement (e.g., Asongu & Odhiambo, 2019; Buhalis, 2019; Oliveira et al., 2020). Numerous travelers widely adopt social media to search, organize and share their travel experiences (Mendes-Filho et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021). User-generated content (UGC), which reflects rich information about customer attitudes, opinions, and experiences, is becoming progressively accessible on social media helping tourism and hospitality firms to engage with potential guests, increase their online presence, enhance brand recognition and consequently lead to more substantial sales revenues (Asongu & Odhiambo, 2019; Chu & Kim, 2015; Gunasekar & Sudhakar, 2019; Xiang et al., 2017). Simultaneously, tourism and hospitality industry practitioners have also been scrambling to work through the ever-shifting maze of social media to contact guests, enhance communication through customer engagement, and improve sales (Buhalis, 2019; Xiang et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2019).

Being the most populous country globally, China has one of the largest overall hospitality industries globally and has become a country that shows incredible development in emerging technologies (Liu & Hung, 2020; Qiu et al., 2019). The rise in living standards and opening up to foreign trade and investment coincided with the explosion in technology, resulting in Chinese millennials being more affluent, tech and digital savvy, and open to new experiences (Athwal et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2020). More than 90% of millennials in China today own a smartphone and extensively utilize social media as a primary source of information (Wei et al., 2017; Wei & Liu, 2019). Nevertheless, China's social media landscape is unique and distinctively different from the landscape elsewhere in the world (Gan. & Wang, 2015; Wang, 2016). For example, the most

popular social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter are officially blocked in many regions of China to control the creation, storage, and cross-border transmission of data (Hobbs & Roberts, 2018). Instead, a plethora of domestic social media platforms have emerged to serve the same functions. WeChat has emerged as the largest social media platform in China that customers use to connect, receive and share information daily (Harwit, 2016; Tu, 2016).

Social media platforms have received significant scholarly attention in the tourism and hospitality industry in recent years (cf., Chu et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2020; Tajeddini et al., 2020a; Xiang et al., 2017). Despite the central role that social media plays in travelers' hotel decision-making journey (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017), understanding the gratifications obtained by the travelers when using social media to make hotel choice decisions has been limited (Athwal et al., 2018; Gupta, 2019). Moreover, studies focusing on gratifications obtained by travelers when using WeChat in travel-related decision-making are in short supply (Qu et al., 2017; Skavronskaya et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2018). More specifically, the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers in making their hotel choice decisions through WeChat remains little understood (Li, 2020; Qu et al., 2017; Xiao, 2019). As WeChat facilitates a wide variety of travel-related activities, and since the usage and gratifications differ significantly among the users (Zhao et al., 2018), understanding the gratifications travelers obtained from specific activities provides a complete picture of their level of participation (Malik et al., 2015; Smock et al., 2011). Building on the well-grounded Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), our paper addresses the void in prior literature by answering the following research question: "What are the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat to make hotel choice decisions?".

From a theoretical perspective, the diversity of media usage is noted in the UGT research strand (Kaur et al., 2020). However, the UGT, which has its roots in the communication literature,

although relevant to social media, has not been given prominence in the tourism and hospitality and social media literature (Athwal et al., 2018; Dolan et al., 2016; Ho & See-To, 2018; Liu et al., 2019). Moreover, the existing literature on the UGT shows explicit biases towards gratifications sought by individuals when using social media, and gratifications obtained through social media have received scant scholarly attention (Athwal et al., 2018). Thus, our paper contributes to the current body of literature on the UGT by providing a fine-grained perspective on the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat to make hotel choice decisions. Further, our paper also contributes to hospitality marketing literature by expanding hospitality industry practitioners' understanding and awareness about the role and the influence of WeChat on travelers' hotel choice decisions.

We begin the remainder of this paper by reviewing the UGT, focusing on various gratifications obtained through social media platforms and specifically WeChat. Then, we outline the methodological approach adopted, followed by the findings of our study. Next, we discuss our conclusions, presenting an array of theoretical and practical implications. Finally, we discuss the limitations of the study by highlighting several avenues for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT)

The individuals' socio-psychological needs guide the media consumption habits they seek to gratify (Katz et al., 1974). Gratifications are conceptualized as need satisfaction obtained when particular media types meet an individual's socio-psychological needs (Katz et al., 1974). Gratification sought and gratification obtained are two distinct components of the UGT (Rubin, 2009). Gratification sought has been identified as corresponding needs for using a particular media, while gratification obtained has been considered the actual outcome or gained gratifications (Bae,

2018; Hussain et al., 2020). Discovering gratifications obtained by individuals using a specific media can provide insights into the continuous usage of a given media (Bae, 2018; Katz et al., 1974).

By performing an analysis of past research, Katz et al. (1974) discovered that gratifications obtained from the use of a particular media vary depending on different personality types, levels of maturity, and individuals' social backgrounds. Moreover, communication literature echoes that gratifications obtained depend on the medium individuals use (Chaouali, 2016). For instance, television provides a different gratification than newspaper, which fulfills another need than listening to music (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Rubin, 1983). Since the 1980s, the UGT has been mostly espoused in studies on conventional media use behavior, for example, reading newspapers and watching television (Ganahl, 1994; Rubin, 1983). However, the technological revolution took place in mass communication, including the rapid use of personal computers, the Internet, and its recent developments such as social media have revived the significance of the UGT. Consequently, scholars have extended the application of the UGT to the studies on modern ICT platforms, including the Internet, e-mail, and instant messaging (Korhan & Ersoy, 2015; LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

Notably, in the past decade, an increasing amount of scholarly work has been devoted to the application of the UGT in exploring gratifications sought in using specific social media platforms, including Facebook (Hossain et al., 2019; Malik et al., 2015), Twitter (Phua et al., 2017), Instagram (Kim & Kim, 2019; Phua et al., 2017) and YouTube (Chiang & Hsiao, 2015; Hanson & Haridakis, 2008). More specifically, a handful of studies have utilized the UGT to examine gratifications sought in the use of WeChat in various activities, including participating in

political discussions (e.g., Chen, 2017), engaging in academic activities (e.g., Gan & Li, 2018), reposting articles (e.g., Wei et al., 2018) and sharing environmental information (e.g., Chen, 2020).

However, extant research on the UGT concerning social media demonstrates an explicit bias toward studying the gratifications sought; and scant scholarly attention has been paid to the gratifications obtained (Athwal et al., 2018). This conceptual contradiction should be immediately addressed as exploring gratifications obtained by the users using a particular medium leads to repeated use of that medium (Bae, 2018). Furthermore, Athwal et al. (2018) argue that when their gratifications are not obtained, the users may be disappointed and, in some instances, will stop using that particular medium. Hence, recognizing the increasing trend of hotels using WeChat to attract bookings, exploring the gratifications obtained by travelers in light of the well-grounded UGT is considered both timely and relevant.

Social media and hotel choice decisions

Social media platforms have become a vital aspect of travelers' hotel decision-making journey by transforming how travelers used to search, evaluate, purchase, and consume hotel products and services on the Internet (Gupta, 2019; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). Over the last decade, there is an increasing trend in which travelers utilized social media to search for travel-related information, specifically online reviews and ratings by peer travelers (Mendes-Filho et al., 2018; Oliveira et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). On the other hand, social media, which can be accessed via mobile devices (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, WeChat), has enabled travelers to share their travel stories using real-time features such as Facebook Live, Instagram Stories (Chu et al., 2018; Gunasekar & Sudhakar, 2019). Furthermore, due to the intangible nature of hotel services and tourism being a hedonic experience, comments and reviews shared by travelers are becoming exceptionally

influential in the tourism and hospitality industry (Tajeddini et al, 2020b; Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2018; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). Travelers tend to trust their peers instead of marketing messages from hotels, as most travelers believe that reviews and ratings from peer travelers are honest and trustworthy (Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2018). Consequently, comprehending peer travelers' experiences helps them make better hotel choice decisions (Gupta, 2019; Qumsieh-Mussalam & Tajeddini, 2016). Thus, UGC acts as a trustworthy source of information for travelers in their hotel decision-making journey, complementing conventional information sources (e.g., travel agents, destination marketing organizations) (Gunasekar & Sudhakar, 2019; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017; Wang et al., 2021). As such, today, the emergence of UGC on social media has revolutionized travelers' perceptions, attitudes, and even behaviors concerning hotel decision-making journey (An et al., 2020; Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2018). However, Gunasekar and Sudhakar's (2019) emphasize that travelers doubt the hotels with a lack or non-existence of UGC on social media, thus reluctant to book such hotels.

Also, recent advances in social media technology offer virtual service agents, often known as *"e-service agents,"* to enhance customer experiences and meet expectations through real-time interactions (Chung et al., 2018). Consequently, Chatbot, an online chat system that offers 24-hour customer service, is recently introduced by most social media platforms to fulfill customer needs for immediate responses (Dominique-Ferreira et al., 2020; Riley et al., 2020). In addition, Chatbots add a new level of support to service quality by ensuring that personalized service is available to meet customer needs at all times and in any location (Chung et al., 2018). For example, most hotels offer Chatbot services to provide their customers access to personal customer service agents regarding hotel offers, and facilitate conversation management with a personal touch (Buhalis & Cheng, 2020).

Although there is an extensive range of social media platforms available worldwide, due to the substantial interference on cross-border transmission of data, the most commonly used social media platform in the Chinese tourism and hospitality sector is WeChat. WeChat is a multifunctional communications application for messaging and calling, social media, and mobile payment, developed by Tencent Holdings in China. In January 2011, it was started as an instant messaging mobile application, but over the course of time, it steadily expanded its functionality with various functions such as messaging, information subscription, socialization, e-commerce, gaming, shopping, mobile payment services, and much more (Montag et al., 2018). Today, with various services integrated into one platform, WeChat has established itself as a lifestyle application. In addition, it is free to download, install and support different types of mobile operating systems with varying forms of language, for example, Chinese, English, Japanese, French, and Spanish. Compared to major social media platforms, WeChat has widely recognized as a digital ecosystem, with over one billion monthly active users contrasted with Facebook's 2 billion worldwide (Chu et al., 2018). Moreover, a typical user checks WeChat every fifteen minutes demonstrating a far higher engagement level than Facebook, where the average time spent online is just 22 minutes per day (Chu et al., 2018).

Despite the central role that social media plays in travelers' hotel decision-making journeys, surprisingly, prior literature has paid limited attention to understanding gratifications obtained by travelers when using social media to make hotel choice decisions (Gupta, 2019; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). More precisely, there is still an incomplete understanding of the travelers' motivations behind the use of WeChat in hotel choice decisions (Cheng et al., 2019). As prior literature indicates, our knowledge of gratifications obtained by travelers when using social media in hotel choice decisions has been mainly advanced through hypothetico-deductive

reasoning approach employing quantitative research strategies such as using questionnaire surveys with numerically rated items (cf. Pop et al., 2019; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). Consequently, prior literature lacks a consistent framework that can provide detailed and holistic descriptions of gratifications obtained by travelers when using WeChat in making hotel choice decisions. Building on this backdrop, our paper advocates the need for following qualitative approach in gaining a nuanced understanding of the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat in their hotel choice decisions.

METHOD

Given the limited understanding of the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat in making hotel choice decisions, the grounded theory approach using a qualitative research method (Yin, 2017) was used to explore the concepts and understanding of gratifications phenomenon in the mindset of the users (cf. Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Academics and practitioners progressively recognize the benefits of using the grounded theory approach to social media research since it allows for more in-depth insights into the gratifications obtained using a particular social media (e.g., McKenna et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2020; Snelson, 2016). Thus, despite the conceptual usefulness of extant quantitative UGT research, methodologically, our work fills a significant gap in prior literature by taking a holistic view to inductively explore the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers in making their hotel choice decisions through WeChat.

In-depth semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of Chinese millennials who have used WeChat for hotel reservations were employed to explore the gratifications obtained when using WeChat in making hotel choice decisions. A series of in-depth face to face and online interviews were conducted to examine the discrepancy between the gratifications sought and

gratifications obtained by users when using a particular medium (Rowley, 2012), and to explore user behaviors in naturalistic settings (Legard et al., 2003). As most of the WeChat users were millennials (Chu et al., 2018; Wei & Liu, 2019), they were explicitly targeted for this research. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling approaches was used to identify and select prospective respondents. Given the exploratory nature of this study, a cross-section of Chinese millennials was selected to discover broad patterns across a wide range of cases and various viewpoints.

The following selection criteria were employed to ensure that the respondents were chosen in a systematic and theoretically informed manner. First, each respondent was required to reserve at least two hotel accommodations during 2017-2020 using the hotel's WeChat official account (WOA). The hotel accommodation that respondents referred to should be made with one of the top ten hotels listed in the 2017 full-year WeChat rankings report published by Dragon Trail International. This report examines and analyzes the performance of six categories of travel brands on WeChat, including national tourism organizations, destination marketing organizations, airlines, cruise lines, museums and attractions, and hotels (Dragon Trail International, 2020). All the selected hotels were identical in terms of their star category; thus can be considered suitable for this study. Second, each respondent should be an active user of WeChat, described as using at least an hour per day over the last twenty-four months or so at the time of data collection. Finally, choosing respondents with demographic profiles (i.e., millennials who are heavy WeChat users and having used WeChat to book a hotel) similar to the majority of the WeChat populace in China helped us confirm external validity. The informants were contacted in public and private universities in both Japan and Switzerland because of convenience access.

Based on the prior literature review, an interview protocol was developed to elicit

responses concerning the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat in making hotel choice decisions. A copy of the interview protocol is included in the Appendix. Given the study's exploratory nature, during the interview process, our interview protocol is continuously modified to capture the broad spectrum of gratifications obtained in using WeChat for hotel choice decisions (Pratt et al., 2019). At the beginning of the interview process, general questions were used to identify the WeChat use behavior of the respondents. As we delve deeper into the interview process, we commenced asking more detailed questions to explore the gratifications obtained when using WeChat in hotel choice decisions. For instance, we asked respondents to pronounce their preferences, motivations, and experiences on the creation of UGC in WeChat, the effect of comments and reviews shared through WeChat on hotel choice decisions, and the advantages of searching for a hotel through WeChat. Some typical questions were: "Before booking a hotel, how do the content/ information you can find in WeChat affect you?", "How would you think the nature of UGC (i.e., positive, negative) on WeChat influences a hotel choice decision?", "How will you feel about selecting a hotel without an extensive amount of UGC on WeChat?", "What are the challenges you have to face in using the WOAs of hotels in searching for information?", "How do posts/photos of your personal circle (family and friends) on WeChat influence you to choose a hotel?" and "How far do you think that accessing information through WeChat before a hotel choice decision is convenient?"

The first three interviews were considered a pilot study, which led to several modifications, including mainly the order of questions or phrasing. At the end of each interview, applying the snowball sampling technique, the respondents were asked to introduce other respondents who have used WeChat to reserve hotel accommodations during 2017-2020. As a result, 25 respondents were identified, and the appointments were made for semi-structured interviews. Since there are no

precise guidelines for the sample size to be considered in qualitative research, we adopted the theoretical saturation strategy recommended by Eisenhardt (1989) in determining the sample size. As such, the interview process continued until we reached theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation occurs when the same ideas repeatedly manifest with no new ideas emerge (Eisenhardt, 1989; Graham et al., 2020). The theoretical saturation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) was achieved with a sample of 14 respondents with no further insights being obtained. Although we were able to achieve theoretical saturation with 14 interviews, we conducted four additional interviews for greater accuracy, resulting in 18 interviews.

In line with the recommendations of Eisenhardt (1989), to control for interviewer bias, all the interviews were conducted in English by two interviewers. In addition, one interviewer was fluent in both Chinese Mandarin and English. Both interviewers had prior experience in the study and practice of WeChat and social media. While the length of the interviews was subjected to respondents' interpretations, all the interviews varied between 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted from June to December 2020. Apart from three interviews, all the other interviews were conducted using Skype to ensure social distancing, where face-to-face interaction was not practical due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each interview was audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees and later transcribed verbatim. Moreover, some notes were taken during the interviews and later integrated into the interview transcripts (Ratten & Denisa, 2017). On average, each interview yielded just over twelve typed pages. Besides, we used the member checking technique to assess the internal validity of the data. Accordingly, the interview transcripts were sent to the participants via e-mail requesting them to review the interview transcripts to evaluate whether we accurately interpreted the data reflecting what they said during the interviews.

These 18 interviews were further augmented by investigating secondary data collected via

online reviews and ratings in hotels' WOAs and popular industry and trade press recommended by the respondents. The use of different sources in data collection enables data triangulation by avoiding shortcomings of relying on one measure in assessing gratifications obtained by the Chinese travelers, thus addressing construct validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Respondents' profile

For confidentiality reasons, respondents' names and the hotels whose WOA the respondents had used were withheld, and only information about the demographic profile and WeChat use behavior of the respondents is presented in Table 1. The respondents were aged from 20 to 32 years old. The average age of the informants was 23, with a standard deviation of 2.8. The sample profile reflects that the majority of the respondents were males (55.6%), and more than half of the respondents spend 1-2 hours a day on WeChat at the time of data collection.

Please place Table 1

Data analysis

We used NVivo software to process all the interview transcripts, field notes taken during the interviews, and secondary data collected via archival materials, including online reviews and the ground verification of hotels' WOAs. Following the thematic analysis strategy suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), our analysis proceeded as follows.

First, we carefully read and reviewed interview transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the content. Second, we identified the in-vivo codes emerging from the interview transcripts by meticulously going through the interview transcripts a sentence by sentence (Qumsieh-Mussalam & Tajeddini, 2016). At this phase, we were predominantly attentive to the

context within which the interviewees shared their experiences to ensure that we understood the intended meaning in coding. The codes were both emergent and borrowed, and we coded in a shared codebook to make it simpler to view each other's coding as we went along. Before finalizing the codes, we had multiple rounds of detailed discussion to arrive at a consensus about the codes identified.

Through several rounds of intense discussions, we refined and categorized our initial codes into data-centric first-order categories (cf. Lofland & Lofland, 1984). For example, in exploring gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat in making the hotel decisions, we proceeded through several stages of coding and categorizing. From the initial coding of the transcripts, in-vivo codes (e.g., well-written content, quality visual content, call-to-action button, chatbots) were derived, ultimately identifying data-centric first-order categories (e.g., interactive content, UGC). We then collated these data-centric first-order categories into a second-order theme (e.g., content gratification) in line with the user gratifications classification explained by Katz et al. (1974). Finally, using a similar coding and categorizing process, we were able to identify two additional themes. Some of these themes are relatively similar to those found in prior literature, with different terms being used in some instances. Yet, given the limited understanding of the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat in making hotel choice decisions, our themes were indeed not totally similar to those already found in the existing literature. Although previous UGT and tourism and hospitality literature provided a profound basis for identifying the main themes, our coding and categorizing could uncover novel gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat to make hotel choice decisions. Table 2 illustrates how the three themes were explored through the analysis process of coding and categorizing them in detail.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) revealed six gratification categories that elucidate the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat in their hotel choice decisions. The six categories that emerged from the thematic analysis procedure include *"interactive content," "UGC," "self-expression," "social influence," "instant access,"* and *"convenience."* Embedded within the broader theoretical and conceptual framework of the UGT, later, we categorized these six data-centric categories into three broad themes, namely *"content gratifications," "social gratifications,"* and *"process gratifications,"* as shown in Table 2. From the analysis, we uncovered that content gratification derives from the ability of the content to encourage the users to actively engage with the content carried through WeChat (Gan & Wang, 2015; Stafford et al., 2004). In contrast, process gratification results from quickly accessing and conveniently searching for information through WeChat (Gan & Wang, 2015; Stafford et al., 2004). Finally, social gratification is characterized as the gratification stemming from fulfilling social needs such as affiliation and belongingness and maintaining social ties by interacting with others through WeChat (Stafford et al., 2004). Identifying the core themes and possible relationships within and among categories allowed us to achieve theoretical integration.

Content Gratifications: Interactive Content

We define the interactive content as the ability of the content to engage in an active conversation with customers (Gan & Li, 2018), thereby drive traffic and improve search rankings in WeChat. All the respondents unanimously viewed interactive content as a vital gratification obtained by them when making hotel choice decisions through WeChat. Unlike conventional media, WeChat

is interactive and allows customers to communicate and share information by initiating a two-way dialogue with the hotel (Gan, 2018). During our interviews and ground verifications of WOAs of hotels, it was apparent that hotels use their WOAs to create and share stories around core topics such as hotel amenities, nearby tourist attractions to visit, local culture, and travel tips. Moreover, WOAs of hotels enable their customers to interact with hotels through a blend of posts, reviews, comments, and ratings.

During the interviews, twelve respondents emphasized that well-written content about the hotel, including the location and services, facilities, and amenities provided, attracts them towards WAOs of the hotels. More specifically, eight respondents accentuated that catchy headlines play a crucial role in capturing their attention and driving them to read the entire content. Customers are more likely to read a whole post when the content seems to be creative. For instance, as respondent (4) stated, he "*usually checks the headline and only clicks to read when it looks exciting.*" Moreover, six respondents emphasized that the posts related to promotional offers and seasonal campaigns for events, restaurants, and spas are the interesting contents that attracted them to participate and interact with WOAs of the hotels and share with their acquaintances. As respondent (10) emphasized, "*I usually read the whole post in which there is some sort of reward for fans, and I like to comment on such posts.*"

Besides, similar to Varkaris and Neuhofer's (2017) findings, our findings indicate that quality visual content has the power to communicate a hotel's service portfolio better. As revealed in the interviews, compelling visual content shared through WeChat can help a hotel create a solid visual identity, encouraging its followers to view the posts whenever the hotel publishes a post. As respondent (6) echoed, *"Whenever I book a hotel, rich visual content matters a lot. First, it helps*

me to get an idea about the hotel. Then, if the visuals are enticing enough, I will do some further research about the hotel, read reviews, find hotel rates and amenities provided."

Most hotels capitalize on the unique features of WeChat, which allows users to tap, swipe or flip their phones to engage with the content excitingly in encouraging their readers to interact with the posts. As respondent (12) highlighted, *"some hotel sent photos of different shaped gift boxes through WeChat. We have to follow the instructions like shake, tap and swipe to try and open the gift to find out what was inside. It was interactive and really fun".* Moreover, it was revealed that hotels use call-to-action buttons such as *"share with your friends"* and *"read more"* and quick response (QR) codes encouraging readers to interact with them through WeChat.

Besides, WeChat offers chatbots *technology to* interact with customers online. As emphasized by Chung et al. (2018), chatbots provide instant access to relevant information at any stage of the customer decision making process. Although most of the hotels still use *"ChatBots"* technology in WeChat for simple customer interaction, as respondent (14) highlighted, some hotels use it in facilitating their guests to obtain tailored information naturally and conversationally at any time they want with just one click.

Content Gratifications: UGC

UGC refers to any form of content, such as images, videos, text, and audio posted by travelers about hotel amenities and services through WeChat (Gunasekar & Sudhakar, 2019). During the interviews, we could uncover three primary UGC levels, which have influenced the respondents in their hotel choice decisions through WeChat, namely positive UGC, negative UGC, and lack and the non-existence of UGC. Concerning the positive UGC, twelve respondents highlighted that positive comments, glowing customer reviews, high ratings, striking pictures and videos, and trendy hashtags influence them positively in initiating the hotel selection process. However, in line

with Gunasekar and Sudhakar (2019) and Varkaris and Neuhofer (2017), we uncovered that positive UGC is not the only factor affecting the choice of hotel accommodation. As respondent (8) echoed, hotels with positive UGC are merely considered if they are *"convenient to access and affordable."* This indicates that, although positive UGC appears to be supportive, but not decisive or able to change consumers' minds, as customers' pre-defined location and price expectations influence their hotel choice decisions.

Negative UGC, such as negative reviews, low ratings, and poor quality pictures, makes travelers slightly *"reluctant"* to choose a particular hotel. Ten respondents accentuated that negative UGC is critical in hotel choice decisions than positive UGC. Although a hotel with positive UGC may be considered as an alternative, a hotel with negative UGC is significantly more prone to be *"barred"* from the list of possible choices (Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2018; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). Three respondents shared their experience in canceling a reservation after being exposed to negative UGC about the hotels they have already booked. As respondent (15) emphasized, he would not book a hotel if *"negative comments outstrip positive ones."*

Moreover, confirming Gunasekar and Sudhakar's (2019) argument on the lack of UGC, eight respondents echoed that a lack or non-existence of UGC on WeChat harms hotel choice decisions. More than half of the respondents highlighted that they are doubtful in choosing a hotel if it does not have a *"considerable amount of UGC"* to make an extensive assessment. Instead, they prefer to select a hotel with substantial UGC as it provides them the *"confidence to verify"* that they have made the right decision. Several respondents stressed that the absence of sizeable UGC makes them feel *"something isn't right"* or even *"dubious"* with the hotel.

Social Gratifications: Self-expression

We define self-expression as individuals' ability to express their feelings, thoughts, or ideas about their travel experience in the form of texts, photos, and videos (Li, 2020) through WeChat. As emphasized by Gan and Li (2018), during our interviews, it was reconfirmed that most Chinese travelers frequently use *"WeChat Moments"* updates to let their friends and family know about the places they have been traveled to. Moreover, most respondents prefer to share their travel experiences through *"WeChat Moments"* by using texts, images, and videos to maintain and build a favorable social impression within their peer groups. As respondent (13) highlighted, some hotels encourage their guests to share emotionally and visually vibrant images that convey meaningful stories about their hotels through *"WeChat Moments."*

Moreover, during our interviews, we could also uncover that WeChat has introduced a feature called "*Friends' circle*" that provides WeChat users a private, semi-closed space to share and receive information only from their WeChat friends, forming an intimate circle among the users' close contacts. As emphasized by five respondents, this feature has further enhanced their self-expression gratification by enabling them to annotate their travel stories only among their conjunct friends, reflecting a more exclusive and firmly structured real-life social circle in China where most contacts are strong ties. Moreover, since most contacts in a friends' circle are close friends or relatives, as Chu et al. (2018) echoed, it is considered a more credible and convincing source of information in the travel decision-making process, including hotel choice decisions.

Besides, as we uncovered, WeChat allows its users to express themselves using emojis and sticker store. As a distinctively unique form of online communication, emojis and stickers enable WeChat users to express their feelings and emotions uniquely when communicating with each other. Moreover, as emphasized by three respondents, this feature has further enhanced their self-expression gratification enabling them to convey their emotional reactions on other posts that they

are interested in with less clutter. As expressed by the respondent (1): *"It gives us a real-time way of interpreting how we feel about the hotel, and emojis capture more than just the data. It also enables hotels to capture customers' feelings and emotions, which is crucial in building customer relationships."* Similar to Zhang et al.'s (2020) findings, our findings also suggest that emojis play a crucial role in integrating the traditional social norms in routine situations with the new norms of social media communication.

Social Gratifications: Social Influence

Social influence refers to the ways in which UGC through WeChat influences travelers to change their hotel choice decisions (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). The emergence of WeChat enables billions of people to share their content, and in doing so, they influence others and are being influenced themselves. In amalgamation with Ukpabi and Karjaluoto (2018), who emphasized that most travelers believe that reviews and ratings from peer travelers are honest and trustworthy, nine respondents stressed that they tend to consider WeChat as a *"non-biased"* and *"authentic"* information source. Thus, they are generally affected by the UGC through WeChat when selecting hotels. According to them, UGC through WeChat is more trustworthy than the *"conventional"* and *"official"* travel channels, for example, travel agencies and hotel websites.

In contrast, the way that *"anyone can post anything on WeChat"* was a concern raised by five respondents, scrutinizing the ability of the UGC through WeChat in influencing others. They did not believe that UGC always accurately reflects *"real"* customer experiences and viewpoints. They raised their concerns regarding the trustworthiness of the UGC through WeChat, highlighting that some UGC might be *"deceiving,"* which incidentally makes WeChat a "*suspicious platform*" to consult for travel purchases.

Moreover, our paper uncovers three different classifications of trust levels relating to the source of the UGC, which customers may consider whenever they select a hotel to stay. We identified that the highest level of trust is associated with the UGC from the *"personal circle"* of the respondents. Respondents appear to generally trust and be convinced by the content shared by their *"personal circle,"* including family, friends, and relatives (cf. Gong et al., 2020). They find it more valuable and reliable, as it stems from the people who they know personally. In amalgamated with Pop et al. (2021), our findings highlight the content originating from key opinion leaders as the second most trustworthy UGC. These key opinion leaders include celebrities, travel bloggers, expert influencers, content creators, and many more. Being a photographer and a professional vlogger, the respondent (12) shared his own experience in this regard: *"People consider me as real and relatable. There were instances where they take my advice seriously in travel purchases.* Concerning the sources of UGC, a hotel's WOA was perceived as the least dependable as it is commercially driven. As the respondent (5) indicates: *"It is widely believed that UGC on hotel WOAs are altered to project a positive outlook about the hotel."*

Process Gratifications: Instant Access

We define instant access as the ability to access information/content related to hotel amenities and services (Tanford et al., 2020) through WeChat whenever and wherever travelers want. In amalgamation with Ukpabi and Karjaluoto (2018), the respondents valued WeChat as a *"credible"* information source to access the latest information on accommodations and hotels, compared to outdated information available on conventional travel channels. Our interviews uncovered that WeChat exposes customers to several different opinions and real-life experiences of fellow

travelers in the hotel selection process. As highlighted by most respondents, WeChat constitutes the primary channel for information search concerning hotel purchases. Simultaneously, this might be supplemented with web crawlers, visits to official hotel websites, and the use of booking sites, for example, Booking.com, to search information before booking a hotel. The underlying reason for considering WeChat as a primary source of information is due to its capacity to offer vital information on a wide range of accommodations and hotels. As the respondent (3) emphasized, the following quotation exemplifies the variety of the information supplied through WeChat: *"WeChat is different from other platforms. It has much richer information about the hotels, including pictures and videos".* WeChat permits customers to obtain an *"objective and authentic overview"* about hotel amenities and offers available from peer travelers who have already visited the hotels in the recent past. While conventional travel channels are still commonly used for hotel search, several respondents underlined that WeChat offers distinct value by offering them a *"search customization"* facility to search information about specific factors, for example, hotel amenities, special offers, and nearby tourist attractions.

Although most of the respondents perceived the wide availability and instant access to information about a large number of hotels through WeChat on a positive note, in some instances, the similar information was considered as likely *"befuddling"* and, indeed, thwarting hotel choice decisions. As respondent (10) highlighted: *"the large number of hotels available and their often contrasting evaluations on WeChat, in many instances, makes the hotel selection process a more time-consuming and complex task than ever before."* Further, during our ground verifications of WOAs of hotels, it was apparent that some hotels' WOAs are burdened with unnecessary information.

Process Gratifications: Convenience

Convenience is defined as customers' ability to use and operate the information/ content shared through WeChat concerning hotel amenities and services in their hotel choice decisions without difficulty (Gan & Li, 2018; Gong et al., 2020). All the respondents unanimously noted that it is convenient to use WOAs of hotels for reservations anytime and anywhere due to its ubiquitous nature. As they emphasized, the functions offered by WOAs of hotels are easy to operate, even for a novice with minimum learning. According to the respondent (16): *"simplicity is another WeChat perk. Hotel reservations through WOAs are extremely simple and user-friendly"*. This seems to be in line with the prior literature as convenience is being identified as the singular most important factor in understanding the customers' acceptance of technology-based innovations (Lai, 2017).

Moreover, twelve respondents echoed that convenience is reflected through the financial support services offered through WeChat. WeChat provides financial support through the facility called *"WeChat Pay,"* enabling customers to engage in seamless, secure, and hassle-free mobile payment processes by scanning a QR code. This makes the shopping process more accessible and convenient for customers. *"WeChat Mini program"* is another reflection of convenience which facilitates customers in their hotel selection process by offering a range of useful services including pricing/rates-check page, a variety of digital payment options for customer's convenience, image and photo libraries, heat map function, search nearby events and venues, various loyalty program registration, bookings, and games among others. Four respondents emphasized this so-called *"a complete dragon"* type of service, a metaphor used to describe the ability to complete the entire shopping processes starting from searching for information to the final purchase, offered by WeChat contributes to convenience gratification perceived by its customers.

The overall consensus is that, to some extent, our findings are consistent with prior literature on social media in general (Gunasekar & Sudhakar, 2019; Pop et al., 2021; Ukpabi &

Karjaluoto, 2018; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017), and WeChat in particular (Gan, 2018; Gan & Li, 2018; Gan & Wang, 2015), uncovering that Chinese travelers obtain a combination of social, process, and content gratifications when using WeChat to make hotel choice decisions. WeChat helps Chinese travelers to accrue information about hotels, evaluate alternatives, save time and make their hotel choice decisions smoothly. Beyond that, our findings demonstrate that in some instances, the use of WeChat when making hotel choice decisions manifests several challenges (i.e., negative or non-existence of UGC, information overload), which may constraint the application and usefulness of WeChat at times. Nevertheless, in the end, there was a consensus among the respondents that while opposing viewpoints exist, the positive benefits offset the negative facets of using WeChat when choosing a hotel to stay. The majority of the respondents reiterated that regardless of certain downsides, they would *"consistently choose WeChat"* in their hotel choice decisions, without returning to conventional travel channels.

CONCLUSIONS

In the past few years, WeChat has substantially evolved the way Chinese people communicate (Zhang et al., 2017). Indeed, the inescapable diffusion and adoption of WeChat have drawn the consideration of scholars and industry practitioners alike (Lien & Cao, 2014). However, despite the growing proliferation of WeChat (Lien & Cao, 2014; Wei & Liu, 2019; Zhang et al., 2017), surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat in travel-related decision-making (Liu & Hong, 2016). Drawing upon the UGT, our study used an in-depth approach to fill this void by holistically examining gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat in making hotel choice decisions. By *"listening"* to a group of Chinese millennials, we uncovered that they obtained a combination of content, social, and process gratifications by using WeChat in hotel choice decisions.

Consistent with prior findings concerning Facebook (Malik et al., 2015), Instagram (Kim & Kim, 2019), Microblogging (Gan & Wang, 2015), and WeChat (Gan & Wang, 2015; Pang, 2016), social gratification is found to influence Chinese travelers' use of WeChat in hotel choice decisions. Various features offered by WeChat, such as WeChat moments, call-to-action buttons and emojis, enable Chinese travelers to annotate and share travel-related experiences and stories conveniently (Gan, 2018; Gan & Li, 2018). However, unexpectedly this is inconsistent with prior findings of Gan and Li (2018), who have highlighted that the intense use of social media may lead to adverse outcomes such as social fatigue and strain. As revealed in our interviews, one possible explanation for this deviation could be the tightly formed real-life social circle in China, with the majority of contacts being strong ties. However, as uncovered during our interviews, WeChat allows users who prefer privacy in sharing their travel experiences an option to share it only among their conjunct friends, while likes and comments made by others are not visible. However, another possible reason why Chinese travelers flocked to use WeChat in their hotel choice decisions may be that WeChat allows them to expose hotel-related information from friends or strangers with less effort.

Content gratification was found to be an important motivator determining the use of WeChat in Chinese travelers' hotel choice decisions. Similar to the findings of Gunasekar and Sudhakar (2019) and Ukpabi and Karjaluoto (2018), who emphasized that most travelers believe that reviews and ratings from peer travelers are honest and trustworthy, our paper uncovered that Chinese travelers tend to consider WeChat as a non-prejudiced authentic information source. Moreover, in amalgamated with Gan and Wang (2015), our work revealed that WeChat satisfies users' content gratification by providing useful, high-quality information along with compelling, high-quality visuals. Furthermore, WeChat users can decide what kind of information to focus on

by personalizing their user accounts, thus preventing themselves expose to rubbish, unwanted information.

Furthermore, process gratification (instant access, convenience) influenced Chinese travelers to make hotel choice decisions through WeChat significantly. Our finding is in line with prior studies on social media in general (Orchard, 2019; Whiting & Williams, 2013; Zolkepli et al., 2018) and on WeChat specifically (Gan, 2018; Gan & Li, 2018; Pang, 2016). As highlighted in the findings, WeChat could be used as a platform for accessing and sharing hotel-related experiences and information whenever travelers need it. In addition, various features offered by WeChat, such as WeChat Pay, WeChat Mini Programs, enable Chinese travelers to search, book, and make payments to hotels conveniently (Gan, 2018; Gan & Li, 2018).

Overall, our findings largely corroborate the prior research (e.g., Ho & See-To, 2018; Lien & Cao, 2014; Gan & Li, 2018; Gunasekar & Sudhakar, 2019; Gupta, 2019; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017) on social media adoption, which specifies that individuals' needs are the fundamental driving forces behind adopting new technologies and communication media (Lai, 2017; Liu & Hong, 2016). In conclusion, although a combination of content, social, and process gratifications are obtained by Chinese travelers in their hotel choice decisions through WeChat, however, in some instances, the degree of influence of each gratification on hotel choice decisions is contextually co-shaped by their pre-defined needs (gratifications obtained).

Theoretical Implications

Our findings offer several theoretical implications as follows. First, our work provides a rich and vivid understanding of gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers' in using WeChat for hotel choice decisions. Much of the emerging UGT research has ignored gratifications obtained by

individuals (Athwal et al., 2018), especially in using social media (Bae, 2018). It can be argued that when an individual feels he cannot obtain gratifications by engaging in a specific medium, he sometimes may stop using the particular medium. By listening to a sample of Chinese millennial travelers, our work uncovered that they had obtained a combination of content, process, and social gratifications by using WeChat in making hotel choice decisions. Moreover, our study reveals that gratifications obtained through WeChat are not static and do not occur in isolation. Instead, it is influenced by the UGC on WeChat, and the intensity of influence differs depending on the level of UGC (i.e., positive, negative, and non-existence of UGC).

Second, our study bridges consumer behavior, tourism and hospitality, social media, and communication literature by highlighting the relevance of the UGT in understating the gratifications behind individuals' hotel choice decisions through WeChat. Moreover, given the limited understanding of the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat in making hotel choice decisions (Qu et al., 2017; Skavronskaya et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2018), our work contributes to WeChat literature by taking a holistic view in inductively exploring the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers in making their hotel choice decisions through WeChat. By doing so, our findings could be used to construct quantitative WeChat measurement instruments, which are currently lacking in measuring specific UGC levels, UGC sources, and associated trust levels.

Practical Implications

For hospitality industry practitioners, several implications that emerged from our findings will expand their understanding and awareness about the role and the influence of WeChat on travelers' hotel choice decisions. First, our results indicate that hotels in China can attract customers by

regularly posting high-quality content with audio messages, videos, photos, and texts. Since pictures and videos are highly capable of influencing a person's imaginations and emotions, hotels should allocate more space for photos and videos in their WOAs to unlock the market potential. Posting relatable content makes customers share it among their peers, which will ultimately lead to enhancing the hotel's online visibility. To sustain online visibility and appear in people's search quite often, a hotel needs to mix a pretty picture of a tourist attraction (e.g., nearby lake, forest, or city skyline) with snaps of its guests enjoying themselves, behind the scenes shots of staff, best amenities, and events.

Second, our findings revealed that hotels in China should be aware of the importance of the UGC on WeChat in stimulating travelers' hotel choice decisions. Combining this knowledge in their *"digital marketing strategies"* and facilitating the real-time UGC will positively inspire and encourage travelers to utilize WeChat in their hotel selection process. Hotels should encourage their guest to post their travel experiences by being in the hotel itself by providing necessary ICT infrastructure such as free Wi-Fi access. Besides, hotels should encourage their guests to share post-trip reviews. The findings convince the industry practitioners about the importance of minimizing negative UGC and making sure the existence of UGC by introducing customer engagement strategies and reward incentives for posting reviews, sharing photos, and including a comment about the stay.

Third, our findings highlight the importance of encouraging key opinion leaders on WeChat to share reviews and contents about the hotels as key opinion leaders greatly influence the Chinese tourism market. Using a person well regarded by the Chinese community to act as an opinion leader for a hotel will pave a long way for a hotel in acquiring Chinese bookings. Staying in touch with such well-known personalities who share the hotel's values and having a striking

online presence in the Chinese community can be an added advantage for a hotel in exploiting the Chinese market.

Fourth, our findings revealed that hoteliers could use WeChat as a promising distribution and communication channel by embracing interactive and real-time features of WeChat such as WeChat Mini Programs, WeChat Pay, emojis and stickers, Friends' circle to drive online bookings among Chinese travelers. Such unique features of WeChat enable hoteliers to integrate the traditional social norms in collectivist Chinese society with the new norms of social media communication.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Like any empirical research, it is important to acknowledge several limitations of our paper that provide future research opportunities. First, our study explores the gratifications obtained by Chinese travelers when using WeChat to make hotel choice decisions by interviewing a sample of Chinese millennials. It is uneasy about assuming that Chinese millennials represent the entire WeChat populace in China. Further research is required to evaluate other generation cohorts (e.g., baby boomers, Generation X) covering a nationwide sample in China to generate new insights. Since our work is excessively focused on WeChat, future research exploring the applicability of these findings to different social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, is undoubtedly warranted and encouraged. Second, our work is limited to cross-sectional data representing the gratifications obtained at a single point in time. Yet, the user gratifications are not static. There may be peculiarities, which could be detected if the data were collected during different time intervals; thus, future research may enhance the gravity of our findings by utilizing longitudinal data. Third, our results are exploratory, pointing to the need for

future research to help build a more robust strategic approach in understanding the influence of each gratification on individuals' hotel choice decisions. Finally, because respondents may be hesitant to express their true feelings in self-reporting studies, conducting a content analysis of travelers' posts and comments on the hotel's WOAs to explore the gratifications obtained by employing a naturalistic dataset may be beneficial. However, as Athwal et al. (2018) emphasized, collecting such data necessitate rigorous ethical consideration.

Conflicts of Interest Statement

We have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Table 2 : Respondents profile

Respondent	Age	Gender	WeChat Usage (hours per day)
1A	23	Male	3-4
2B	24	Female	3-4
3C	20	Male	1-2
4D	23	Female	3-4
5E	20	Female	1-2
6F	22	Male	5-6
7G	27	Female	1-2
8H	21	Male	3-4
9I	32	Male	1-2
10J	22	Female	8-10
11K	23	Male	1-2
12L	22	Male	3-4
13M	26	Male	5-6
14N	22	Male	1-2
15O	24	Male	1-2
16P	22	Female	3-4
17Q	23	Female	1-2
18R	22	Female	1-2

Table 3: Themes and categories derived from qualitative data analysis

Second Order Themes	First Order Categories	In-vivo Codes	Illustrative Comments
Content gratification	Interactive content	• Well-written content • Quality visual content • Interactive features (i.e. swipe, flip, call-to-action button) • Chatbots	… absolutely information is the most important reason for me to follow the hotel's WOA [5] …having a well-written content and video diary are a necessity for luxury hotel brands…[18] …like how different contents are presented on WOA page. You can find pictures, videos and written presentations about restaurants, spa, rooms and even 3D panoramic photo of the hotel exterior [10] I usually first get attracted to the photos shared by other travelers. If it is eye-catching, then only I would start reading their comments and reviews [9] If the post seems appealing to me, I would like to share it with my family and friends [16] WeChat allows users to interact with the context through "Like", "Wow" and "Share" buttons [4] The WOA of the hotel that I stayed used chatbots to provide a better customer experience by providing recommendations and taking in requests [7]
	UGC	• Positive UGC • Negative UGC • Lack of UGC • Non-existence of UGC	Positive UGC influences me to shortlist a hotel [15] After reading the negative reviews, once I had to cancel a booking, and then I had to book another one [11] Negative comments refrain me from booking a hotel [6] I doubt about the hotels with lack of customer reviews and ratings [17] No critical mass of reviews implies something is wrong [2]
Social gratification	Self-expression	• WeChat moments • Friends' circle • WeChat sticker store • Emojis	I like to express my feelings about the things that I see or experience when I visit hotels using WeChat Moments. I can do it in my ways… by using words, pictures or videos [13] Some hotels encourage me to tell my story by sharing a photo album through WeChat Moments [17] I frequently engage in text postings and photo sharing. I think through that I could spark conversations and helped some people in selecting hotel accommodations [14] Unlike other social media, WeChat follows the principle of "my friend's friend is not my friend". So, in WeChat, an individual can only see those likes and comments made by conjunct friends, but cannot see other people's expressions beyond their friend lists. I guess it gives me the confidence to express myself freely [12] I mostly use emojis to comment on others' interesting posts…it is really fun [8]
	Social influence	• Non-biased, authentic information source • Suspicious platform	WeChat is full of non-prejudiced comments… there is no hidden agenda behind it…so I trust the content shared through WeChat [5] Anybody can post anything on WeChat…how can we trust? I know some hotel purposely create fake content to destroy the image of their competitors…they are not reliable…. how can we depend on such content [2] For me, always its friends and family. I tend to trust them more as they are personally known to me. After them, I believe opinion leaders and then the content posted by hotels [8]

		• Trustworthiness of the UGC • Source of the UGC - originating from the personal circle, key opinion leaders and hotels' WOAs	UGC on hotel WOAs are really doubtful. Hotels can manipulate the information available on WOAs at any time. It is not so objective as it pretends. I always prefer to listen to the third party. [4]
Process gratification	Instance access	• Credible information source to access latest information • Rich and updated information source • Search customization • Information overloading	Although I use search engines and other booking sites, for me, WeChat is always the primary channel for information search in relation to travel purchases [1] WeChat enables me to easily access the information and virtualize the place. I feel like I am inside the hotel…I can feel myself wandering around the hotel [11] It is updated. I can even read the comments from fellow travelers who have been there on the previous day [3] I always do extensive search prior to book a hotel…price is not that important to me… rather I search about the attractiveness of the location, quality and the variety of the food and cleanliness as it makes sense to me [2] There's a lot of information here that I don't need. Having so many alternatives might be perplexing at times. It could take additional time [18]
	Convenience	• Ubiquitous nature • WeChat Pay • WeChat Mini Program	I can make room reservation and check the newest events on WeChat [7] Nowadays, booking hotels through WOA is the easiest, fastest and the cheapest way since we do not have much time [13] I would pay the hotel using WeChat Pay, which is really convenient [6] The hotel that I booked through WeChat has used WeChat Mini Programs to develop real-time booking and online payment functionality….so I could search, book, and make online payments [9]

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Topics	Questions	Related Literature	Category
General information	Please state the followings about yourself. a. Gender b. Age c. Level of education d. Profession e. Average monthly income		
	How many hours per day do you spend on WeChat?		
	What are the things you mostly do by using WeChat?		
	How many times have you used WeChat to book a hotel accommodation during 2019? Can you please provide us some more information about the hotels you booked through WeChat in 2019?		
Content gratifications	Before booking a hotel, how do the content/ information you can find in WeChat affect you?	Gan & Li (2018); Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, (2018); Varkaris & Neuhofer (2017)	Interactive content
	How far do you think the information availability in a hotel's WOA influences selecting a hotel to stay? What are the challenges you have to face in using the WOAs of hotels in searching for information?		
	What made you share information about hotels and their offers through WeChat?		
	How would you think the nature of UGC (i.e., positive, negative) on WeChat influences a hotel choice decision?	Gunasekar & Sudhakar (2019); Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, (2018); Varkaris & Neuhofer (2017)	UGC
	Can you explain about a few WeChat posts that ever stimulated and encouraged you to book a hotel?		
	How will you feel about selecting a hotel without an extensive amount of UGC on WeChat? If you have ever done that, what are the challenges you confronted with?		
Social gratifications	Can you please explain your experience in sharing information through WeChat (related to a hotel stay)?	Gan (2018); Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, (2018); Varkaris & Neuhofer (2017)	Self-expression
	What are your reasons for sharing positive/negative experiences through WeChat after staying at a hotel?		
	How do you think the content you shared through WeChat is helpful for others in their hotel choice decisions?		
	How do posts/photos of your personal circle (family and friends) on WeChat influence you to choose a hotel?	Gan (2018); Gunasekar & Sudhakar (2019); Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, (2018); Varkaris & Neuhofer (2017)	Social influence
	What are the challenges you have to face in assessing the trustworthiness of information shared by people not known to you personally?		
Process gratifications	How will you feel about WeChat's power in sharing information?	Gan (2018); Gan & Li (2018)	Instant access
	How do you describe the promptness of information shared through WeChat?		
	How far do you think that accessing information through WeChat before a hotel choice decision is convenient? Can you please explain your idea a bit further?	Gan (2018); Gan & Li (2018)	Convenience
	In your view, how far WOAs of hotels are user-friendly? Can you please elaborate on that?		