IS SOCIAL COMMERCE

THE NEXT CHAPTER OF E-COMMERCE?

A Comprehensive Study of Social Commerce in China

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Abstract

Some scholars argue that social commerce is about to change the online shopping scene irreversibly and it holds big potential for marketers (Yajing Diao et al., 2019). In China it is already believed by practitioners to far exceed the development experienced in the West. Yet, the research in this field is still limited (Wang, 2014; Huang & Benyoucef, 2015; Lin et al., 2017). This paper focuses on the Chinese market and aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the social commerce concept and the related practices. We first introduce the specifics of Chinese context. The introduction is then followed by previous findings in the field of social commerce (SC), where we also clarify the definition of social commerce concept. We conduct our investigation through three perspectives of main stakeholders: customer, platform and brand. The research is based mainly on qualitative methods, focus groups and in-depth interviews. As a result of our findings, we present a new understanding of consumer journey in social commerce and describe specific platform's role in this journey. In the end, suggestions for platforms and brands who want to survive, develop and grow in virtue of social commerce are given.

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1. Introduction

China has become a leading force in e-commerce and digital technologies that is recognized domestically and globally. Today, the country accounts for more than 40% of worldwide transactions, up from just below 1% about a decade ago (Wang et al., 2017). The already large and still growing base of Chinese consumers is extremely digital and mobile savvy and it provides massive data pools that propel innovations in commerce and digital trade. E-commerce for Chinese consumers means much more than simply purchasing goods online, it is an important driver of economic and social development. Given the immense scale of China's economic development and rapid transformation into a digital economy, it is not a surprise that the topic of social commerce (SC) has gained an increased attention of scholars and practitioners in recent years. A common point among different studies in this field is that social commerce (SC) has transformed the online shopping scene from product- to customer-oriented. Now, it is interactions with other users and customers, as well as the information shared among them, that drive commercial activities (Busalim & Hussin, 2016; Li & Ku, 2018). Further, according to some marketers, social commerce in China is already far ahead of Western countries and the trends developed in the country are believed to revolutionize the global business landscape in the future (Wang, 2014; Wang et al., 2017). Estimates of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce show that the social commerce market in China will reach three trillion yuan by 2020, accounting for about 30% of all online retail transactions (Xinhuanet, 2018).

Despite the rapid growth and increasing influence of social commerce, the number of studies on this topic is rather limited (Huang & Benyoucef, 2015). Future research ought to examine the practical contributions, with a focus on the opportunities to utilize and optimize social commerce for marketing and sales (Yadav et al., 2013; Han et al., 2018). In the research conducted in Western societies, the term social commerce is often used along topics like e-commerce, social shopping and social media marketing (Liang & Turban, 2011; Curty & Zhang, 2013) and there is no one uniform understanding of the concept (Han et al., 2018). Moreover, Western scholars often discuss social commerce in the context of big social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram, while in China, it is more and more often discussed as a phenomenon that has taken up a life of its own (Wang, 2014). Besides, there is scarcity of research published in English that focuses on social commerce in China. This is crucial as Chinese users do not have access to some of the platforms for which social commerce mechanisms are observed in Western societies. Gibreel et al. (2018) has taken an effort to investigate the development of social commerce in the emerging markets. However, the assessment was based on the case of C2C sales on Instagram and data collection has been limited to Kuwait. For these reasons, the results cannot be generalized to other emerging markets. Moreover, the findings cannot be extended to Chinese users in particular as many of the examined social media platforms are blocked in China (Yuan, 2018). Similarly, Wang and Zhang (2012) as well as Zhou et al. (2013) have discussed the development of social commerce research and practice. However, they have only briefly discussed the group-buying popularity in China that drives social commerce and they have arguably not achieved a deeper understanding about the specific platforms utilized for social commerce in China. As previous research covering this topic has mainly been focused on the Western cultural context, Lin et al. (2019) suggests that the uniqueness of the Chinese environment calls for new research that takes the specifics of Chinese context into consideration. This includes the regulatory environment, area-specific online platforms and cultural aspects, which may have an impact on consumer behaviours and preferences (Lin et al., 2019).

1.1 Research Objectives

This study aims to make up for the drawbacks pointed out by previous researchers and by doing so, strives to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the social commerce potential for local and international companies (Huang & Benyoucef, 2015; Busalim & Hussin, 2016) from the Chinese culture lens (Wang & Zhang, 2012). In order to achieve this goal, this paper will cover the gaps identified in previous studies. Instead of focusing on specific aspects like trust, loyalty or the intentions to engage (Busalim & Hussin, 2016), it will present a broader overview of the ways Chinese consumers engage in social commerce and investigate the critical factors that influence the consumer journey and decision making (Han et al., 2018).

The analysis of social commerce in China will be conducted through three perspectives, namely the customer perspective, firm (brand) perspective and platform perspective. These three components have been widely considered throughout existing studies on social commerce (Liang & Turban, 2011; Wang & Zhang, 2012; Zhou et al. 2013; Yadav et al., 2013; Han & Trimi, 2017). Although some researchers have extended this framework by more specific elements, like e.g. management, technology, information (Wang & Zhang, 2012) or context (Han & Trimi, 2017), looking closely at studies conducted by other scholars, it is evident that many of them come down to these three fundamental aspects.

In order to get more insights from the consumer perspective, focus groups and individual in-depth interviews are employed for data collection. For the firm (brand) perspective, individual interviews with market experts from Danish businesses working with the Chinese market are carried out in order to understand how companies and brands leverage social commerce and to assess the potential of social commerce for marketing and sales. Lastly, to get a better understanding of the Chinese platform environment, six cases are selected and analyzed based on secondary data and the opinions of consumers and market experts. The assessment of existing platforms will help to shed light on the current Chinese social commerce landscape and the consumer journey in social commerce. Moreover, as advised by Wang and Zhang in 2012, the holistic understanding of the social commerce landscape is achieved by looking beyond individual platforms, but rather, by identifying critical features that are prevalent among different platforms that are competing in social commerce. This "can provide more values in the turf battle" for platforms (Wang & Zhang, 2012, 120). As the outcome of the research, practical contributions for competing platforms as well as for marketers and practitioners on successful ways to engage in social commerce will be provided (Yadav et al., 2013; Han et al., 2018).

Based on an assessment of the previous research in the field of social commerce, besides the main goal to gain a comprehensive understanding of social commerce in China, this paper is guided by the following three sub questions:

1. How are the domestic online platforms shaping the social commerce landscape in China?
2. How can we understand the consumer journey in social commerce? Which factors influence the consumer journey and the purchasing behavior in social commerce?
3. How do companies leverage existing social commerce platforms for marketing and sales?

1.2 Structure of This Paper

This paper takes its point of departure in gaining a better understanding of the Chinese context and the regulatory environment. Also, local platforms are presented in the following section discussing the background. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In section three, the literature review and the theoretical foundation of the paper is presented, including different definitions and frameworks that derive from previous social commerce research. In this section, a definition of social commerce guiding this paper is clarified. Moreover, other relevant theories that help to answer the research questions will be introduced, including previous literature on consumer purchasing journey, social interaction and social impact-related theories and definitions. In section four, the methodology of this research is delineated, including research philosophy, research design, data collection and analysis methods as well as an assessment of the validity and reliability of this research. In section five, the research's analysis and findings are illustrated. The six chosen platforms analysed in this paper are introduced and discussed in regards to their features that support social commerce activities. In section 5.2, the resulting types of social commerce platforms and their development orientations based on a Venn-diagram are explained in detail. Further, findings from focus groups and individual in-depth interviews with consumers are presented and analysed. Then, in section 5.4, the consumer journey in social commerce will be elaborated. Finally, in section 5.5, the findings from the interviews with market experts are presented. In section six, the final findings are discussed in connection with previous research in social commerce. It will be elaborated on how this research has extended our knowledge regarding the social commerce landscape in China and further, how it fits into social commerce (SC) research. Lastly, the managerial implications for platforms and brands are presented, followed by the research limitations and future implications. Section seven is devoted to the main conclusions of this paper.

2. Background: What is unique about the Chinese context?

China, as the world's second largest economy and a crucial player in the global market, has become an important subject of observation among scholars and marketers around the world. The rapid development of the online commerce landscape and the emerging online shopping trends in China as well as changing behaviours and preferences of Chinese consumers in recent years have not escaped their attention.

According to eMarketer's (2019) latest worldwide retail and e-commerce forecast, China is becoming the world's top retail market in 2019, surpassing the US by more than 100 billion USD. E-commerce is a major driver of China's retail economy, with sales growing more than 30% in 2019 to reach 1.989 trillion USD, which means 35.3% of China's retail sales occur online. The Chinese online market is changing drastically, and it is becoming increasingly competitive. Big e-commerce giants are being challenged by smaller local players that emerge with the raising popularity of social commerce. In 2018, there has been an increase of monthly active users of social commerce platforms by almost ten times of the growth rates of second-hand commerce, cross-border e-commerce and integrated e-commerce (Nielsen, 2018a). As many of the platforms that are popular in Western societies, like e.g. Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, are banned in China, these numbers represent activities on domestic platforms (DeGennero, 2019). Considering the specific character of the Chinese market, being dominated by big domestic companies and platforms, separated from the Western counterparts by 'the Great China Firewall', it is valuable and important to build a more comprehensive overview of this unique environment. As mentioned by Nielsen (2018b,4), "understanding the emerging trends today (in China) will be essential for success tomorrow".

A co-created report by BCG and Aliresearch (2019) indicated that China's overall economic growth is slowing, but the Chinese consumer economy is still massive in absolute terms and poised for increasing growth. China is a global leader in the mobile market sector and the digital economy is currently thriving in the market. The Chinese population is extremely connected via digital technology and the time people spend each day on smartphones, laptops, and tablets exceeds global averages. Thanks to consumers' willingness to adopt the newest technologies and innovations in their lives, it is being estimated that Chinese digital economy accounts for more than 30% of China's GDP (BCG, 2019; Nielsen, 2018b). According to Nielsen (2018b, 4), "while digital waves are touching shore across the globe, there are undercurrents unique to China that are having a massive influence on consumption". Chinese consumers are becoming extremely connected and empowered, but that also entails that they expect more convenience, variety and quality in their shopping experiences than before. The expectation of convenience in particular is related to mobile payment solutions and mobile-friendly shopping channels (Lannes et al., 2018).

Similar to other emerging markets, falling prices for mobile devices and relatively cheap network investment made China choose mobile devices as the primary factor to establish digital connectivity (Forbes, 2017). Therefore, Chinese consumers were the early adopters of a mobile-first mindset. Not surprisingly, they were recently found to be much more digital than their global counterparts (BCG, 2017a; Deloitte, 2018). Mobile has already become the core of consumers' seamless omnichannel experience. Today, Chinese consumers are spoiled with a wide choice of user-friendly apps with countless features assisting in any aspect of life, shopping, banking, entertainment, paying for utility bills or booking a doctor's appointment (Forbes, 2017). In 2015, Chinese consumers made more purchases through mobile phones than computers for the first time (ibid.). Last year, the country hit another new record in mobile payments with 60.5 billion transactions. This accounts for 61% annual growth, according to a People's Bank of China report (PBOC, 2019). Compared to global users, Chinese consumers use mobile phones for transactions and online shopping way above average (Nielsen, 2018b).

With the expected introduction of 5G technology in China in 2020, the consumer connectivity will allow for improved seamless omnichannel consumer experiences and possibly an even more crucial role of mobiles in the overall consumer experience. After the popularization of 5G technology, consumers are expected to access data with up to 100 times faster speed than today, creating a smoother experience when browsing for information, watching movies and videos through mobile devices. It is also expected to create a more diversified interaction between online sellers and shoppers thanks to live-streaming and virtual reality features. In addition, 5G speeds will improve data flows that drive artificial intelligence and machine learning. Already today, artificial intelligence and machine learning play an important role in the Chinese consumer market. Due to ever-increasing expectations of Chinese, the digital market develops in an extremely fast pace. Seamless consumer experience is no longer a novelty. China is pioneering in AI-based mobile apps that local consumers utilize comparatively more than their global counterparts (Nielsen, 2018b). Chinese consumers are also more willing to share their data in order to receive customized recommendations and personalized content. As a result, Chinese companies and platforms have collected a vast amount of valuable consumer data regarding their preferences and behaviours, giving them a big advantage over retailers in other countries (Lam, 2018; Reagan, 2019).

The adoption of smart terminals and big data also helped to develop the logistics that has a big impact on online purchase experience (Reagan, 2019). The planning, execution and control of the movement and placement of goods and services must all occur within a given system that is designed to achieve the respective objectives, which may vary by industry. In China, e-commerce giant companies like JD and Alibaba have mastered this side of the business almost to perfection, and the warehousing and logistics sectors are developing hand in hand with the growth in consumption. According to JD's chief technology officer Zhang Chen, AI and logistics are the main source of competitive advantage: "Whichever player can connect all the data and make the whole flow from customer to supply chain to logistics (...) will have the best opportunity to create the most efficient network" (Chen, 2018 in Financial Times, 2018, para.21).

An article by the Boston Consulting Group (2017) indicates that China is at the forefront with new ways of innovation, which is mainly thanks to the Chinese people who were largely involved in digital interactions, making it easier for companies to generate customer data. The Chinese market is extremely competitive and offers a wide choice of platforms, mobile apps that use consumer data and AI to provide the most optimized experience from pre-purchase to post-purchase stages, including other functionalities, like e.g. entertainment and social networking. Today, brands, e-commerce and social media platforms can stay up to date by creating predictive and personalized experiences for their consumers. They can do so by blending social media and shopping, tracking lifetime customer relationships, and using big data to target specific consumer groups with content and products suited to their taste profiles (Nielsen, 2018b). Social media is no longer only a tool for social networking and e-commerce is no longer focusing only on the purchase. Big Chinese social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo have long ago started implementing additional features combining entertainment with commerce, which according to Nielsen (2018b), became the "core purchase driver" (Nielsen, 2018b, p.8). On the other hand, e-commerce platforms started implementing features like livestreaming to engage users and enhance social interactions (Soo, 2018a; Wang, 2019). Today, a big driver of online commerce in China relies on social factors, C2C social interactions, online communities, sharing and group buying. Greatly developed online and mobile payments, machine learning and big data provide good grounds for development of social commerce and adaptation of features in line with consumers' needs and preferences. Besides social media and e-commerce platforms that have been largely investing in the creation of environments enabling social interactions embedded in commercial activities, new successful players emerging on the market have been extensively discussed, including platforms as Pinduoduo and Xiaohongshu.

Pinduoduo and Xiaohongshu were often named to be one of the frontrunners of social commerce in China. Pinduoduo is a platform that combines group-buying with a gamified experience, while Xiaohongshu's social commerce model is based on online community and cooperation with key opinion leaders (KOLs) that generate and promote interesting content (Deloitte, 2018; Soo, 2018a).

Besides these platforms, China has since 2010 witnessed significant growth of video consumption as a source of information for users. There were nearly 250 million Chinese watching short videos at the end of 2017 and the market is projected to be worth 30 billion yuan by 2020, according to iResearch (2018). This caused the emergence of many video platforms covering different age groups and consumer segments, with the most often discussed short-video platforms including Douyin, Kuaishou, Meipai and Xiguashipin (Graziani, 2018a). Because of the embedded AI algorithms, e.g. intelligent recommendation, they have become extremely popular among Chinese consumers, providing them with strong communicability and social networking through the cross-platform sharing (Nielsen, 2018b). In addition, these platforms not only offer entertaining content, but also commercial features that help to drive purchases. Recently, a lot of attention has been paid to livestreaming sales in China. Last year, the biggest Chinese e-commerce platform Taobao reported a turnover of 100 billion RMB in 2018, with an annual growth rate of 400 percent for its Taobao Live livestreaming feature (China Daily, 2019).

A big part of the success of video and livestreaming platforms, next to ingrained mobile payment systems and entertaining format, comes from celebrity involvement. Compared to their global counterparts, Chinese consumers are recognized to be highly influenced by celebrities and KOLs across Chinese social media (Lackey, 2018). Due to the big size of the Chinese market and the various consumer groups in different parts of the country, KOLs are a quick and easy way for brand owners to target their audience. Chinese consumers born in the digital era pay much less attention to traditional advertising and more to social media and online communities, which creates a room for influencers. As shown by a survey conducted by KPMG in 2016, Chinese value online reviews and recommendations higher than their counterparts in the UK and USA (KPMG, 2016).

2.1. Regulatory Context in China

When discussing the uniqueness of the Chinese context, the diversity of different platforms and technologies, it is inevitable to mention the recent changes in the Chinese legal environment that influenced the online trade activities to a great extent. In January 2019, the "New E-commerce law" came into force, regulating a wide range of areas designed to protect all stakeholders in the online commerce environment, consumers, merchants and brand owners. The new regulations under "New E-commerce law" and "Cybersecurity law" require all online platforms to implement measures to fight copycats and counterfeits and false advertising. In addition, they also address issues related to consumer protection, data protection and cybersecurity (Zhang & Yin, 2019; Soo, 2019). Consumers are expected to benefit from the newest regulations by being more safeguarded from counterfeits, which platforms are obliged to filter out and monitor. Besides, according to the provisions of new E-commerce Law, misleading commercial promotions and other ways to defraud consumers by fabricating transactions and creating falsified comments have been prohibited. E-commerce platforms are now jointly obliged with the merchants to assure consumer protection and disclose accurate product/service information. Moreover, the regulations of cybersecurity law give consumers the possibility to opt-out from personalized advertising and content (Zhang & Yin, 2019; Clark, 2019).

Another key aspect of the E-commerce law is the recognition and inclusion of non-traditional shopping channels, such as social media or social commerce platforms, bringing popular apps like WeChat or Douyin under the new legislation (Fujino, 2018). In recent years, the number of online micro-businesses across these non-traditional channels have increased manifold (ibid.). Some individuals have for instance started to sell goods and services directly on their own social media pages, creating a new informal consumer-to-consumer (C2C) sales channel. In China, these individuals are also more commonly known as "daigou" or shopping agents who purchase goods overseas on customers' behalves and mail the goods or bring them into China. These shopping agents are often associated with WeChat, where they advertise their services in friends' social circles or acquaintances in WeChat groups. The goods purchased by daigou agents range from fashion and cosmetics to nutrition products and pharmaceuticals. Until recently, daigou agents did not pay any taxes for their activities and were in the grey area of Chinese legislations (Lavin, 2019). Under the provisions of "The New E-commerce Law", daigou agents are obliged to formally register their businesses and obtain a business license in order to continue operating. Non-compliance to the new regulations risk fines as high as 2 million RMB for illegal business and tax evasion (Huang, 2019). The inclusion of the non-traditional shopping channels and daigou activities under the new regulations is supposed to make online shopping more secure and safe for consumers (Lavin, 2019; Huang, 2019). On top of that, the changes in the regular environment are also expected to create more trust in the online platforms and different stakeholders and encourage more consumers to join Chinese online market (Clark, 2019).

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

3.1. Introduction to Social Commerce (SC)

Since the early 1990s, China's e-commerce has started keeping pace with, and even managed to exceed, the progress experienced in the Western world. Today, after more than 20 years of development, the Chinese online environment and various specific players on the market impact people's daily lifestyles, ways of thinking and consumption patterns, but also production and management methods for businesses (MOFCOM, 2019). Social commerce is perceived to be an important paradigm in the whole online market landscape with a lot of potential. However, it is also associated with many challenges for businesses willing to enter this field. To gain a better understanding of the concept of social commerce, different perspectives from previous research are introduced and reviewed in the following section. Then, in section 3.1.2, the current status of the development of social commerce research and practice in China is presented. In section 3.1.3, a comparison of social commerce to e-commerce is made, followed by the definition of social commerce used in this paper.

In section 3.2, the existing literature considering the consumer decision making journey and consumer experience is introduced. Section 3.3 examines social interaction and impact-related theories. Combined, these two sections form the foundation for the consumer analysis in sections 5.3 and 5.4.

3.1.1 Perspectives on Social Commerce

In the Western world, the term 'social commerce' first appeared in 2005 to describe new features of the Yahoo! Shopsphere marketplace that allowed users to review and comment on product lists (Wang & Zhang, 2012). User-generated content was soon also adopted by other big e-commerce sites like Amazon and eBay (Wang & Zhang, 2012, Han et al., 2018). Later, besides the activities that consumers engaged in on e-commerce sites, social commerce also started to be used in relation to a range of firm-related activities, e.g. in the case of Flowers.com, which opened the very first store on Facebook in 2009 (Busalim & Hussin, 2016, Han et al., 2018).

The example of Flowers.com and the new features adopted on Yahoo Shopshere reflect the two trends of social commerce distinguished by both Liang and Turban (2011) as well as Lin, Li and Wang (2017). The scholars' assessment of the state of social commerce research has been quoted by various other researchers. The two trends involve (1) commercial elements implemented on social media sites and (2) social networking elements implemented in e-commerce sites. In addition, Lin, Li and Wang

(2017) describe a third trend of social commerce, namely offline firms that use social media to improve their business performance. Although both social media and social activities as well as e-commerce and commercial activities are often perceived as the fundamental elements of social commerce, there is a wide variety of meanings behind the term social commerce (Liang and Turban, 2011). Looking at the previous research in this area, it largely depends on the chosen perspective and research objectives, so that the focus can either be from the consumer's perspective, e.g. consumer behavior, or from the firm and business perspective, like the development of online communities and business models (Yadav et al., 2013). For instance, Stephen and Toubia (2010), who examined social networks between sellers, understood as individuals, defined social commerce as "relationship-based online commercial activities" (Lin et al., 2019, 213). On the other hand, Friedrich et al. (2015), who focused more on the business-side, examined technologies used in social commerce initiatives and presented social commerce as a "relationship-based customer-centric business", where customers actively participate and interact with others during the buying process (Friedrich et al., 2015, 1).

As social commerce involves multiple disciplines, e.g. marketing and computer science, the majority of previous research in this field lack the clarity when it comes to the parties involved in social commerce activities: whether they are customers, firms or both customers and firms (Yadav et al., 2013). Moreover, some scholars do not clarify the specific activities that are a part of social commerce. The authors highlight that it is crucial to analyse both firm and consumer perspectives in order to obtain a holistic picture of the social commerce environment. In addition, all commercial activities that constitute for pre-purchase evaluation, shopping decisions and post-purchase behaviours ought to be considered (Lin et al., 2017; Yadav et al., 2013, 312-313). As there is still not one single standard definition of social commerce, scholars usually adapt different definitions of this paradigm in different research papers. Han et al. (2018) distinguish three main understandings of the concept of social commerce:

1. Combination of social media with e-commerce features on a platform

2. Subcategory of e-commerce or new innovative category of e-commerce enabled by social media and social networks that facilitates social interactions and enhances online shopping experience, promotes online transactions and information exchange

3. Internet-based commercial application utilizes Web 2.0 technologies and social media and supports user-created content and social interactions (Han et al. 2018, 40).

Despite these most common understandings of SC, Zhou et al. (2013) argue that they are not reflecting the whole complexity of social commerce, among all the multi-channel activities and convergence of online and offline social networks, and "social commerce is not just a simple fusion between e-commerce and social networking technology" (Zhou et al., 2013, 62).

As mentioned before, due to a lack of a uniform understanding of social commerce and different perspectives adopted by scholars, a number of frameworks and methods to analyse social commerce have been utilized. For example, Liang and Turban (2011) analysed previous research in the field and observed SC from six perspectives, including two fundamental elements social media and commercial activities as well as research themes, methods, underlying theories and outcomes in order to define the scope of social commerce and identify potential research issues. Nevertheless, these authors analysed previous research only in the Western context and only referred to Western platforms and their development, e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn and Groupon. On the other hand, Wang and Zhang (2012), who analysed the development of social commerce between 2005 and 2011, took a more holistic approach and assessed social commerce development in China and other Asian countries. They proposed a framework with four dimensions based on the adapted I-model developed earlier by Zhang and Benjamin (2007). These four dimensions include people, management, technology, and information. The first dimension is the main driver of socialization and commerce and among all, includes social psychology and national culture. The management dimension consists of multichannel social networks, group-buying and business strategies and models. Technology is related to different channels as online platforms and smartphones. Lastly, the information component is referring to the authors as the fundamental component of social commerce. It includes different sources and ways of content creation and usage, including peer-generated, community-generated and co-created content of the consumer and marketer. Although similar to Liang and Turban (2011), Wang and Zhang (2012) referred mainly to development trends of Western platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Groupon without differentiating between other popular platforms used in other countries as China, they also noticed the rising popularity of group-buying and the emergence of "Groupon copycats" in China (Wang & Zhang, 2012, 113). Moreover, the scholars observed that social commerce in Asia, mainly in Japan and China, is following a different development track that requires further assessment and advised to employ a culture lens for future research.

Zhou et al. (2013) criticized Wang and Zhang's (2012) framework for not addressing the effectiveness of social commerce efforts. The scholars proposed a modified framework extending it by the strategic fit dimension with four similar components, where management was substituted by business. These four elements are understood as independent parts that constitute for social commerce and according to the authors, they help to understand the social commerce research development and practice. Differently from Wang and Zhang (2012), the authors argue that these components are interdependent and require a strategic fit and integration with others in order to propose successful strategies to engage in social commerce. By the strategic fit, the authors mean that parties engaging in social commerce should continuously adapt and change their strategies by considering all four elements proposed in the framework (Zhou et al., 2013, 63).

On the other hand, some scholars also investigated social commerce from the technological perspective. While it has been emphasized that social commerce is enabled and driven by technology, different scholars used different concepts to assess platforms in relation to their social commerce features, components, dimensions, tools or functionalities (Curty & Zhang, 2012; Frederich et al., 2015; Han & Trimi, 2017). The previous researchers noticed a lack of consensus when it comes to what can be defined as a social commerce platform and there are limited studies dedicated towards social commerce platforms and their role (Curty & Zhang, 2012). Huang and Benyoucef (2013) suggest a standard framework to define the social commerce design and propose four basic abstract social commerce features that any social commerce website should cover, i.e. features that enable commercial activities (commerce layer), generating content, user participation and interaction between individuals (individual layer), community-level interaction and conversation/sharing (community and conversation layers). Nevertheless, the authors of this framework have been criticized for not answering what is the business impact of applying this framework and as a result, which features companies/platforms should focus on (Friedrich et al., 2015). Zhou et al. (2013) proposed applying the mentioned concept of strategic fit to explain which practices in social commerce are successful.

Regardless of the objectives of previous research in the SC field, looking closely at different frameworks and previous studies, it is evident that there are three main components that have been identified across previous research, namely consumer, merchant (company) and platform (Liang & Turban, 2011; Wang & Zhang, 2012; Zhou et al. 2013; Yadav et al., 2013; Han & Trimi, 2017). For instance, taking the framework by Zhou et al. (2013), which was named to provide a "relatively complete picture of fundamental elements of social commerce" (Zhou et al., 2013, 6), its people component is linked with consumer, business is similar to merchant (company), while technology and information are related with the platform dimension. As the main objective of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of social commerce in China, this paper will also be based on these three fundamental aspects.

Given that previous researchers noticed that there is still limited research on Chinese social commerce and in addition, that it is different from the Western cultural context, these three perspectives will be undertaken with a Chinese culture lens (Wang & Zhang, 2012; Lin et al., 2019). The analysis of the consumer perspective is conducted in order to get a better understanding of consumer behavior and decision making among Chinese consumers in social commerce. The platform perspective provides more insight into the specific platforms that are utilized in China and covers the gap of previous research that focused mainly on platforms that are not accessible in China (Yuan, 2018). Lastly, the firm perspective focuses on business practices and ways companies can successfully engage in social commerce by integrating all three aspects, namely consumer, platform and company.

Nevertheless, the social commerce definition used throughout this paper needs to be clearly defined. Before doing so, the following section presents the understanding of social commerce and social commerce platforms in China mainly among Chinese-language research and basing on that knowledge, distinguishes between social commerce and e-commerce. In the end, a definition of social commerce guiding this paper is introduced.

3.1.2 Social Commerce in China

During recent years, social commerce attracted increasing attention from scholars around the world and has become an important field with a potentially big impact on businesses (Lin et al., 2017). According to Yunfei Lu (2016), up to date research in this area written in Chinese is still limited, as the speed of the rapid development of social commerce is difficult to be followed by scholars. Chinese social commerce creates a more complex environment than in the West when it comes to practices used by marketers and the number of platforms and different functionalities available for consumers. In addition, it is developing very fast, in 2015 the annual social commerce transactions per user amounted to 2134 RMB, which was 75% higher compared to the year before (CNNIC, 2016). According to Sentance (2018a), social commerce in the West is mainly tailored for individuals, while Chinese social commerce ventures like Pinduoduo and WeChat make the experience truly social. In line with the trends distinguished by Han et al. (2018) introduced in the previous section, the Western social commerce comes either from a fusion of social and e-commerce on a platform or by adding social media features to an e-commerce platform.

While the focus of Western research resonates around platforms like Facebook and Instagram, Chinese scholars' focus is mainly on local platforms, namely Weibo, WeChat, Mogujie, Pinduoduo, Taobao and others (Wang & Zhang, 2012; Lin et al., 2019; Yajing Diao et. al., 2019; Xianyi Yang et al., 2018; Zhaoyang Lin, 2018). There is no comprehensive overview of Chinese social commerce research, however, Sun and Zhang (2017) observed that at present stage, China's social commerce can be divided into three main types. The first is an e-commerce model developed by big social media platforms with large user base. By creating effective user flow on the social media platform, consumption demand is created passively through social interaction and the user-generated content, which helps these companies achieve sales growth (Sun and Zhang, 2017). The second is emerging social shopping site, these new platforms are good at keeping up with the latest fashion trends in order to attract a large number of users in a very short period of time (Lin, 2018). The third one is the social features established by e-commerce platform itself to strengthen shopping stickiness of customers. A large amount of shopping exchange information not only keeps considerable user flow, but also provides a lot of valuable sample materials for the platform to analyse consumer behavior and preference (Sun and Zhang, 2017).

The truly social character of Chinese social commerce mentioned by Sentance (2018) has been emphasized by Lin (2018), who claims that social commerce also uses social functions to improve the relationship between buyers and sellers. The interests of merchants and consumers are opposite, which makes it difficult for buyers and sellers to build trust and mutual understanding of each other's expectations. Thus, harmonious and transparent communication on online marketplaces can benefit both parties, improve the whole shopping experience by providing more personalized transactions and bridge the distance between buyer and seller (Ou et al., 2014; Lin, 2018). Besides, social commerce was found to affect the power switching between the buyer and seller as well as change in roles of buyer and seller. The buyer in social commerce is more empowered, as he not only consumes content and receives product or service information but is able to generate content and share it with others. These C2C interactions have been found to directly and indirectly influence consumers' behavior and decisions, meaning that the impact generated by the seller himself in social commerce has been diminished (Haiji & Sims, 2015). In addition, unlike on e-commerce platforms, social commerce enables buyers to naturally change into sellers (Jang et al., 2013). This can for instance be illustrated by the CPS model that explains the profit model of social commerce. According to Lin (2018), the most common profit model of each output party of social commerce is the CPS revenue model (Lin, 2018). CPS stands for Cost-Per-Sale, a payment model pioneered by

Amazon. According to the CPS revenue model, in the process of selling a product, the company, the platform and the users who play a promotional role on the platform can obtain commissions for each sale. The model encourages a change of traditional consumer behavior, which is that a consumer can also take the role of a seller. Nowadays, more and more social platform users are willing to turn their knowledge of certain product and experience of purchase into an advertising method on the platform. According to Sun and Zhang (2017), a consumer who is already equipped with experience of the purchase process, can easily earn actual monetary rewards or virtual payments from the platform and the brand (Sun and Zhang, 2017). Therefore, the CPS revenue model achieves a win-win situation for platforms, brands and consumers, and generates a virtuous circle of consumption (Lin, 2018).

3.1.3 Social Commerce Vs. E-Commerce

As mentioned in the previous section, social commerce is often linked with e-commerce and the differences between those two concepts has been studied extensively in the past (Gibreel et al., 2018). What mostly distinguishes e-commerce from social commerce is that e-commerce is more product-driven and consumers act rather independent in their buying decisions. Social commerce, on the other side, is socially centered and user-driven, and social shopping experiences are intertwined with social interactions (Liang & Turban, 2011; Li & Ku, 2018). Moreover, consumers in social commerce are sharing information and opinions with other users and businesses, while in e-commerce, the information-sharing is much more limited and usually does not involve businesses. E-commerce users are involved in one-way communication by reading and creating reviews and comments about the products. Furthermore, e-commerce platforms do not provide the grounds for continuous information exchange where users with the same interests can connect, interact and form a community, like it is possible in social commerce (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Gibreel et al., 2015; Lin et al. 2019). According to Curty and Zhang (2013), social commerce also should not be used interchangeably with social shopping, since social commerce is a broader term and in addition to the social shopping experience, it is providing a platform where social interactions and purchasing activities influenced by interactions with other users take place.

In Chinese-language literature, this last aspect of social commerce, namely commercial activities influenced by interactions with other users, is largely emphasized. Lin (2018) pointed out that social commerce has changed the form of consumer demand. Social commerce consumers are not driven by subjective demand for the purchase of goods or services like in e-commerce, but rather, by passively generated consumer demand through social interaction and user-generated content.

According to Xianyi Yang et al. (2018), social commerce has significant advantages over traditional e-commerce. Firstly, the discussion of merchandise on social platforms can continually stimulate consumers' purchasing intentions and even achieve the results of repeated purchases by consumers. Moreover, like advertising, the information published by celebrities on the platform can also transfer their followers' trust into the willingness to purchase the recommended products and then complete the purchase behavior (Xianyi Yang et al., 2018). Secondly, as mentioned previously, e-commerce sales are limited to consumers with purchase intentions, while for social commerce, social resources can be fully utilized to generate demand. Data shared by users on the social platform can optimize information collection, attracting users' attention and encouraging them to spread the information to others. Thus, social commerce can attract and target a broader market than e-commerce (Xianyi Yang et al., 2018). Taking this into consideration, Yajing Diao et al. (2019) suggest that brands and platforms should carry out a sustainable interaction mechanism to stimulate consumers' social behaviours for product promotion.

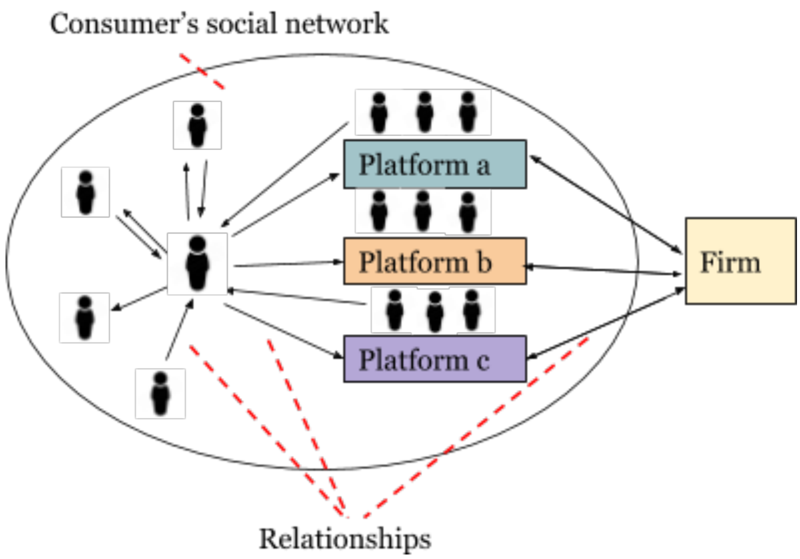
Our Definition of SC

In order to reach the objective of this research, a more comprehensive understanding of social commerce in China, local customer engagement in social commerce and tips on how businesses can successfully engage in social commerce and optimize the selling and marketing of products through social commerce is provided. In this paper, a broader definition of social commerce is employed, taking into account the characteristics of social commerce in China:

Social commerce refers to exchange-related activities that occur in, or are influenced by, an individual's social network and relationships formed on online platforms (after Yadav et al., 2013; Yajing Diao et al., 2019).

As illustrated in the graph below, this definition of social commerce domain is designed to present a multi-faceted perspective. It includes activities of both consumers and firms that occur in different stages of the buying process. This means they are not only limited to the transaction itself, but also encompass pre-purchase and post-purchase activities. Moreover, it takes into consideration multiple influences on consumer from different directions, individual's social network and relationships formed on online platforms.

Figure 1: Illustration of the definition of social commerce



(Source: personal collection)

3.2 Consumer Decision and Purchasing Journey

The consumer decision and purchasing journey can be discussed as a starting point of understanding social commerce, as understanding the way consumers make buying decisions, channels where they are active and the factors that have an impact on consumers' purchasing journey are fundamental elements for companies that want to be successful in a new market. The knowledge of consumers' behavior, preferences, attitudes and motivations can help to build and improve marketing strategies to effectively reach the target consumers (Stankevich, 2017). This knowledge is also essential to gain a better understanding of consumers in social commerce, their decision-making path, shopping habits and the role of platforms in their buying experience. For these reasons, different perspectives adopted by scholars when it comes to consumer purchasing and decision journey are presented and evaluated in this section.

Through the years, consumer behavior, understood as "the process and activities people engage in when searching for, selecting, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services so as to satisfy their needs and desires" (Belch & Belch, 1998, 113), "including the decision processes that precede and follow these actions" (Engel et al., 1995, 4) has been an active field of research that covers a wide scope of different approaches. Many scholars have investigated this topic and by so doing, adopted various perspectives, either looking at the specific stages related to the purchasing or experience journey, or focusing more on the influencing factors (Stankevich, 2017). In recent years, there was an enhanced discussion whether the consumer buying path can still be depicted as a linear funnel, or whether it should rather be illustrated in a nonlinear model.

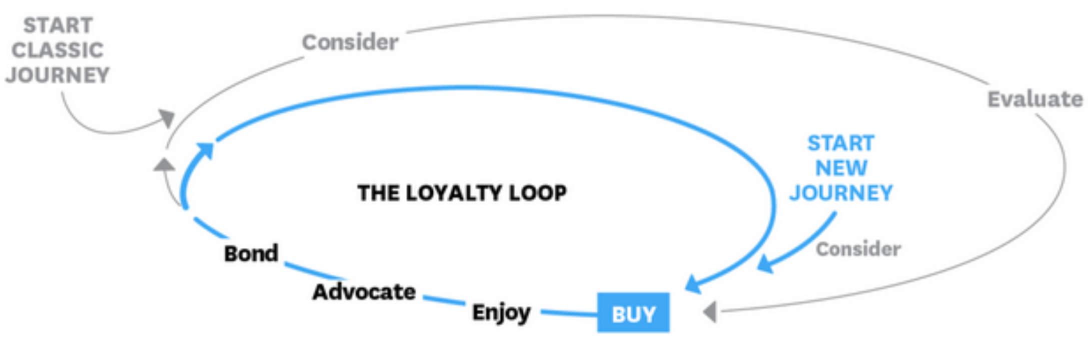
The most common traditional linear purchase model describing the buyer's journey distinguishes five main stages: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post purchase behavior. According to this model, a marketer needs to have a good understanding of each step in order to effectively communicate and direct the customer to complete the purchase (Stankevich, 2017). Similarly, this model is closely linked to the still-used attention–interest–desire–action (AIDA) model, which also attempts to illustrate the buyer's journey in a linear way (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 71). Nevertheless, these models appear to be less useful nowadays. The diverse digital channels and greater number of products to choose from empower consumers and let them make more informed decisions. Many scholars have highlighted the mismatch between the traditional funnel models and the market trends today. With the entrance to the internet era, consumer behavior has changed significantly, making the consumer purchasing journey more complicated than what is encompassed by the traditional linear purchase funnel (Bonchek & France, 2014). The variety of information sources and more complex communication at all stages, including pre-purchase to post-purchase, from one-to-one, one-to-many to many-to-many, enabled consumers to have much more control and bargaining power than shoppers offline (Eroğlu, 2016). According to Bonchek and France (2014), consumers can nowadays enter the purchasing path at any stage and move between stages without any linear pattern. This phenomenon has been observed by Solomon et al. (2006) who criticized the traditional model and argued that consumers do not go through all the stages every time they make a purchase and the number of stages or the steps they follow may differ, depending on the situation and what is being purchased. Different scholars discussed an example of impulse purchases, referred to as 'purchase momentum', where consumers often do not engage in planning, information search or evaluation of alternatives (Solomon et al., 2006, 259). On the other hand, Haven (2007, 1) named the traditional marketing funnel to be a 'broken metaphor' that does not account for the impact of social media on the buying process and claimed that marketers no longer have the power to impact a consumer and move him toward the purchase. The traditional marketing funnel does not capture the whole complex process of consumer journey, consisting "detours, back alleys, alternate entry and exit points, external influences, and alternative resources” (ibid., 2). He proposed a new engagement model which offers a completely different approach and considers the influence others have on one's actions and decisions, for instance friends’ recommendations, product reviews and other forms of peer influence through e.g. interest groups or user generated content like videos. The engagement model, designed to help marketers understand consumers’ behavior and intentions, consists of four components: involvement, interaction, intimacy, and influence. It describes the consumer journey that starts from relationship with the brand, like visits to the company site, and extends further to relationships with consumers, like activities involving sharing experiences and recommendations, that generate feeling of intimacy or belongingness to a community (ibid.).

In response to Haven’s (2007) model, Armano (2007) presented another non-linear alternative, which is known as the purchase spiral. This approach presents a community-based focus that also assigns a big importance to the consumer engagement with other consumers, through a circle of interaction and engagement followed by participation and conversation and in the end, affinity and community. The more consumers engage with a brand, the more the spiral amplifies (Armano, 2007). However, this model did not receive much attention from scholars (Stankevich, 2017). One of the most popular alternatives illustrating the buyer’s journey in a form of a circle with one’s purchasing decision at the core has been proposed by McKinsey & Company (2009). McKinsey & Company conducted qualitative and quantitative research in the automobile, skin care, insurance, consumer electronics, and mobile-telecom industries across three continents. The outcomes of this research revealed that a large part of the consumer purchasing decision journey is occupied by word-of-mouth recommendations from one’s social network as well as search for online reviews and interactions with the store and other buyers. Moreover, due to the amount of information available to consumers nowadays, more brands can suddenly appear during the consideration of alternatives than what consumers initially considered. In addition, the authors distinguished two types of consumers: active and passive loyalists. Active consumers will stick to the brand, but also engage with it by recommending products to others. The other type of consumers is not committed to one brand and is likely to be convinced by the competitor’s offering. Despite the types of consumers, the resulting model is still very similar to the traditional funnel when it comes to the stages the consumer is going through and the transaction placed in the centre. Four phases of the model include initial consideration; looking for alternatives and potential purchases named as active evaluation; closure or the purchasing phase; and finally, post-purchase, indicating the consumer experience of the product (Court et al., 2009).

The Consumer Decision Journey model developed by McKinsey and Company (2009) has been criticized for concentrating on the purchasing decision, which was argued not to be the centre of the buyer's journey. As software company SAP Digital's Chief Digital Officer Jonathan Becher said: "The pivot is the experience, not the purchase" (Bonchek & France, 2014, para.9). According to Visa's Chief Brand Officer Antonio Lucio, consumer engagement, interactions and relationships may be more worth than the actual purchase (ibid.).

In 2015, the model initially proposed by McKinsey & Company (2009) has been revised and updated. Edelman and Singer (2015) argued that instead of marketers influencing the word-of-mouth activities and reacting to consumers when they move toward the buying decision, they ought to influence the whole journey. This is possible thanks to the adaptation of technologies, which allows to design and optimize consumers decision journey. Companies building the most effective journeys should master four interconnected capabilities: automation, proactive personalization, contextual interaction and journey innovation. Automation allows to create a seamless online journey from information evaluation to the transaction. Proactive personalization and contextual interaction allow to make use of the information collected about consumers' past behavior and decisions to optimize and suggest the content and steps one is likely to follow on the way to the purchase. Lastly, journey innovation implies using the data about consumers and newest trends to offer better services and new or improved features. These capabilities allow to bring value not only to consumers, but also brands, who can turn users into loyal customers. Moreover, according to Edelman and Singer (2015), they can help brands to compress or in some instances also eliminate the initial consideration and evaluation stages and bring consumers straight to the purchase, relationship and loyalty building stages, which include the experience, advocating and bonding stages, as illustrated in the graph below.

Figure 2: Consumer journey



(Source: Edelman and Singer, 2015)

Boston Consulting Group (2017b) has recently observed that the purchasing journey of Chinese consumers differs substantially from the consumers in the West. The discovery and purchase may happen through channels that are not originally related to shopping, but entertainment, socializing or education/information-gathering, are fully integrated thanks to the embedded commercial features like shopping links. As a result, the content-driven discovery can lead to a purchasing intention. Nevertheless, thanks to the integration of transaction systems and post-purchase elements into these non-traditional shopping channels, consumers still follow a seamless consumer purchasing path (BCG, 2017b). Bonchek and France (2014) noticed that a seamless personalized consumer journey is enabled thanks to technology, where engagement is driven due to the attractiveness of personalization. This reflects the previously introduced views of Edelman and Singer (2015). Consumers can move from awareness to action instantaneously. Nevertheless, what differs from Edelman and Singer (2015) in these findings, is that according Boston Consulting Group (2017b), the core of the consumer journey is not the purchase, as the opportunities for transactions are simply embedded into user experience. Moreover, not only the personalization and optimization of content help to direct consumer steps toward the purchase, but also social interactions that occur prior to the purchase are important aspects that may influence consumers' decisions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The updated model of McKinsey & Company presented by Edelman and Singer (2015) neglects these aspects of social influences and focuses largely on the marketers or platforms actions to design consumer journey. As argued by Bonchek and France (2014), the advocacy stage is also possible to occur prior to the purchase, because advocates today are not necessarily consumers themselves that share after-purchase experiences, but also the fans and followers who share interesting content like the influencers and celebrities. For these reasons, McKinsey & Company's model might not be suitable for our research to better understand online users of social commerce in China. The engagement model developed by Haven (2007) may help to measure different types and levels of consumer engagement and investigate social interactions, but the model is based on an assumption that consumers starts their journeys from the company's or brand's website that should be taken into consideration when applying this model.

Regardless of the applicability of the previously researched models, they provide a firm foundation to think holistically about the consumer purchasing journey. As consumers go through pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stages and different touchpoints, the whole process makes up for a consumer experience that may be shaped by factors that are beyond the firm's control (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

As mentioned previously, in today's digital era, discovery and purchase may happen across channels not originally associated with shopping (BCG, 2017b). In order to better comprehend this journey, according to Bonchek and France (2014), a good model of today's consumer purchasing path should reflect four main aspects. First, it should depict a non-linear path to purchase and address the complexity of social influence. Then, the social influence aspect should convey the role of advocates, including other consumers, but also influencers and celebrities. Lastly, marketers' focus should be directed towards relationships formed throughout the journey that are shifted and extended beyond transactions.

Because the core of our definition of social commerce is concentrated at the *exchange-related activities that occur in, or are influenced by, an individual's social network and relationships* (after Yadav et al., 2013; Yajing Diao et al., 2019), these four aspects, namely, multidimensional nature of social influence, individual's relationships and engagement as well as the role of opinion leaders and influencers are the key elements for a better understanding of the social commerce phenomenon in China. These aspects will be discussed in the following sections of this paper.

3.2.1 Understanding the Purchase Journey from the Consumer Perspective: Multi-channeling behavior

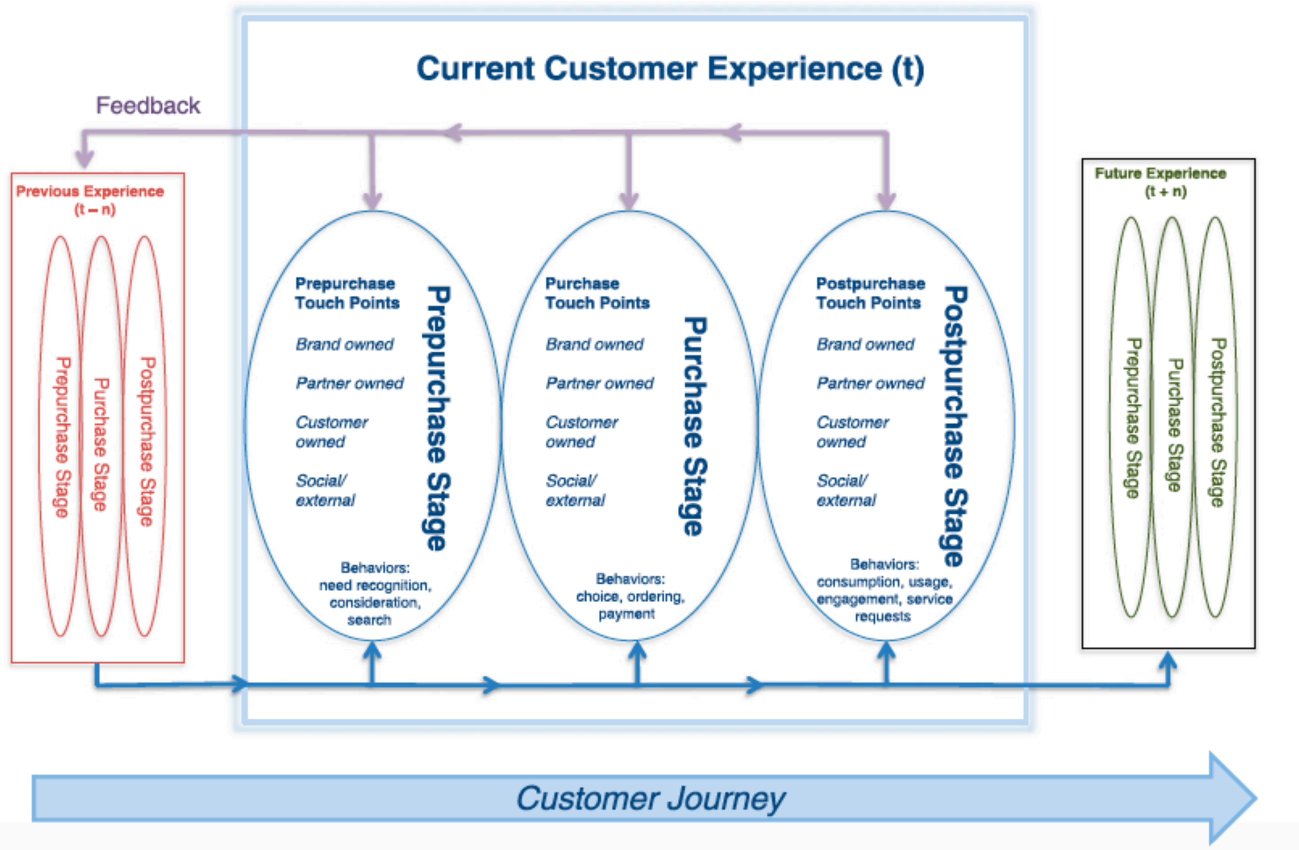
Before moving to the introduction of relevant social interaction and engagement related theories, it is vital to present the theory explaining multi-channeling behaviour that is closely related to the consumer purchasing experience path, as it helps to better understand the consumer buying journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

In the era of increasingly complex consumer behaviour, consumers face a wide selection of different channels and touchpoints both online and offline. Simultaneously, the multidimensional nature of consumer experiences and influences creates a big challenge for researchers and marketers. One of the significant challenges which firms find hard to control are C2C interactions through social media platforms, recommendation sites and blogs as well as online communities (Libai et al. 2010). Although the research on the impact of social information on consumer purchasing decision has been rather scarce (Chen et al., 2017), Song and Yoo (2016) analysed the role of social media in the pre-purchase stage and found that social media have an important role in the consumer journey and purchasing decision. The authors found a positive relation between the purchase decision and social media as a platform for sharing experiences and collecting information through social interactions, but also acquiring discounts and special deals. Besides, Zhang et al. (2015) examined social media as a pre-purchase information gathering tool in the Chinese context and found that convenience and easy accessibility, valuable, useful and informative feedback from other users as well as recommendations from friends and family attract consumers to use social media in pre-purchase stage. In addition, social interactions and entertainment were found to be important drivers for engagement in social media information search (Zhang et al., 2015).

According to Rondán-Cataluña et al. (2015), social media is an important information source for not only online, but also offline consumers. Previous research distinguished between two characteristic consumers: webroomers and showroomers, who use both online and offline channels during their purchase journey. Basak et al. (2017) defined showrooming as the activity of looking at products offline and shifting to buy them online. On the other hand, the concept of webrooming describes the reverse phenomenon, where a consumer finds a product online and shops offline. Fernández et al. (2018) have observed that webroomers focus more on product attributes that are important for their purchasing decision and devote more time for the purchasing process, especially to gather more in-depth information before the purchase. Showroomers, on the other hand, tend to follow trends, product attributes are less determinant for their decision and they are more easily influenced by branded products. They buy higher priced products and usually search for a channel where the product can be acquired for a lower price (Fernández et al., 2018, 309). Nevertheless, one should be cautious when defining multichannel shoppers. As noticed by Sands et al. (2016), preferences and the behaviour of multi-channeling consumers change in line with changing and newly appearing channels.

Frasquet et al. (2015) suggested that in order to better understand the multichannel shopping behaviour, online researchers should take into consideration different motives for the choice of channels that are used at each stage of the purchase process. Depending on the type of product or pre-purchase, purchase or post-purchase stage, the choice of channel and touchpoints may differ. Therefore, consumer may be influenced by a wide variety of factors throughout his purchasing journey. Lemon and Verhoef (2016), who investigated the purchase journey from the consumer experience perspective, examined pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase touchpoints. They made a distinction among four categories of customer experience touchpoints: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and lastly social/external/independent, which are created to illustrate the multidimensional nature of customer interactions in today's digital era. As presented in the model below, consumers can interact with all these touchpoints at every stage of purchasing journey. Brand-owned touchpoints include interactions that are managed and controlled by the firm, like marketing promotions, advertising and physical product features. Partner-owned touchpoints are jointly designed and managed by a firm with external, distribution or marketing partners. Here, it should be mentioned that in instances where the distribution partner is an app or an online marketplace platform, the partner may also have significant influence on the brand-owned touchpoints, like the available features (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 77-78). Customer-owned category is completely beyond a firm's control. These touchpoints are shaped by individual preferences and involve all channels where consumers voice their opinions, experiences and ideas, like product reviews on blogging platforms. The last social or independent category is created to enhance the importance of others in the customer experience. External social or independent touchpoints include variety of peer influences through independent information sources, for instance on social media platforms.

Figure 3: Customer Experience Journey



(Source: Lemon and Verhoef (2016)

Although this model presents the customer journey as a linear path, with its focus on the consumer experience, in principle it does not exclude the possibility of a non-linear consumer journey. Due to the adoption of a consumer experience perspective by the authors, it mainly takes the complexity of social influence into consideration, as well as influences of other consumers through the social/independent touchpoints which may be channels originally unrelated to shopping. Bonchek and France (2014) consider these two aspects to be crucial when discussing today's consumer purchase journey.

Recently, other researchers, including Wagner et al. (2018), have also paid attention to not only specific touchpoints, but also different online channels that might have a significant impact on the consumer journey. According to Wagner et al. (2018), the consumer experience can be influenced not only by shopping intentions and touchpoints, but also situational benefits that are related to the used technology. The authors investigated the consumer behaviour in multichannel e-commerce and made a distinction between different e-channels, for example mobile devices and e-channel touchpoints like mobile shopping apps, which consumer comes across during a purchasing journey. Using different devices, like mobile or computer, as well as different touch points related to every device, e.g. mobile app or mobile website, was also found to have an impact on the overall consumer experience (Wagner et al., 2018).

Huang et al. (2016) analysed the effect of mobile commerce on consumers' shopping behaviour and observed that although the investigated consumers tend to purchase less expensive products through mobile, the overall purchase frequency and order amount has increased. Nevertheless, due to lack of data, this study did not take into consideration cross-channeling behaviour at different stages of the purchase journey, like consumers who search on mobile devices, but do not conduct the final purchase through mobile (Huang et al. 2016, 275).

When discussing multichannel behaviour, it is inevitable to look into the drivers behind the journey, the way consumers choose different channels and the factors that influence their choices and behaviours. It is important to investigate not only which channels and touchpoints are used, where the journey starts and where it ends, but also why consumer chooses certain channels and touchpoints. Developing an omnichannel understanding that encompasses the whole consumer journey and experiences and looking beyond multichannel choice, helps to better comprehend consumers' influences and motivations (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). To achieve this omnichannel understanding, as advised by Bonchek and France (2014), the following sections introduces social impact and social interaction-related theories that sheds more light on the social aspects of social commerce.

3.3. Social Aspects of Social Commerce

One of the factors discussed extensively in connection with consumer motivations and influences are social interactions happening in social networks (Libai et al., 2010). Social interactions of consumers have previously been found to positively affect consumer willingness to purchase across channels in China (Guo & Zhou, 2015). Xu-Priour, Truong and Klink (2014) have conducted a comparative study on Chinese and French consumers and the relation between social interactions and shopping behavior. They have observed a stronger effect of social interactions on trust perception and online shopping intention in China than in France. E-commerce companies have also recognized the importance of social interactions during the consumer journey and hence started to capture data on the social interaction between consumers on their websites, with the potential objective of understanding and leveraging social influence in customer's purchase decision making to improve customer relationship management across all consumer journey stages (Kim & Srivastava, 2007). As social influences and interactions in one's social network are at the core of our definition of social commerce, the next section presents the previous researches in the area of social network and the role of social influences, considering the characteristics of the Chinese context.

3.3.1 Importance of social networks and the concept of guanxi in China

Social networks have been previously named to be key drivers for social commerce, with the influences between individuals in a social network being the building blocks of social commerce (Liang et al., 2011; Wang & Zhang, 2012; Yadav et al., 2013). The role of social networks in channeling information and influence has been analyzed and examined extensively by the social network theory (Liu et al., 2017). In its simplest form, a social network is a map of all relevant ties between the nodes. Social network theory suggests that nodes are the individual actors within the networks, and ties are the relationships between the actors. There can be many kinds of ties between nodes. The network can also be used to determine the social capital of individual actors. Social capital can be referred to the links, shared values and understanding in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and work together. Different from traditional sociological studies, in social network theory, the attributes of individuals are perceived to be less important than their relationships and ties with other actors within the network and more importance is attached to an individual's network (Liu et al., 2017).

As this paper is mainly focused on the Chinese context, it is inevitable to get a better understanding of the role of social networks in China. The importance of social networks has been understood by Eastern intellectuals long before their Western colleagues. Therefore, the Chinese concept of guanxi is perceived as a predecessor of social network theory (Hampden-Turner & Trampenaars, 2000). The word "guanxi" represents the interpersonal connections among Chinese people. Guanxi is often translated as "connections", "relationships" or "networks". However, none of these terms fully express the complexity of guanxi and its central role in the Chinese culture. The concept of guanxi can be used to describe a network of contacts, which an individual can call upon when in need, and through which they can exert influence on behalf of another. Some historians argue that long since Song Dynasty, the Chinese business community has gone through many episodes of political turmoil, relying on personal associations of trust and cooperation, and guanxi functioned as a defense mechanism to cope with times of instability. In modern China, where the legal system is still relatively young, these traditions persist as an informal system for creating trust and confidence in the social and business life.

As mentioned previously, according to Hammond and Glenn (2004), the Chinese concept of guanxi is a form of social network theory. The two share some similarities, for instance when it comes to social ties, which were researched more extensively in relation to purchasing behavior and intentions than Chinese guanxi (Ou et al., 2014). In Chinese guanxi, the concept of "Zi Ji Ren" (insiders), who are highly trusted, is important. Normally, this group of people includes family and friends who are offered some degree of automatic trust and are considered completely trustworthy. Insiders are expected to share important and accurate information among themselves, even secrets (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). "Wai Ren" (outsiders) in guanxi represents the group of people that are less trustworthy and unstable (Chu & Ju, 1993). Granovetter (1973) made a distinction between strong ties and weak ties that resemble these concepts of insider and outsider relationships. Strong ties can be understood as relationships with people with whom one has regular and direct contact, and share similar values, beliefs and morals. On the other hand, weak ties are the nodes in social networks that reach out beyond immediate friends and family (Hammond & Glenn, 2004). According to Krämer et al. (2014), strong ties provide consumers with mutual emotional support, while weak ties information support and little mutual confiding. Wang and Chang (2013) have however found that both strong and weak ties have influence on consumer's decision making. Although scholars found a higher effect on purchasing intention when it was related with high-risk products, there was no such relation observed in case of low-risk products (Wang & Chang, 2013). Even though the literature is still scarce in this area, previous researches have, besides tie strength, also investigated different types of social ties (Dong & Wang, 2018). Dong and Wang (2018), who analyzed how technology can be used to form relationships in social commerce, noticed that previous researchers discussed three kinds of social ties: buyer-buyer, buyer-seller and seller-seller. The reflection of these types of social ties can also be found in the concept of guanxi.

Previously, scholars have indicated that the weak institutional protection for consumers and the lack of institution-based trust in online platforms in China might encourage utilization of guanxi and relationship-based commerce. As noticed previously by Lin et al. (2019), the concept of guanxi that is deeply ingrained in the Chinese culture and the key component of buyer-seller transactions may serve as a trigger for the intention to engage in social commerce activities. To analyze the relationship between buyers and sellers in online marketplaces that refer specifically to buyer-seller social ties, Ou et al. (2014) introduced the term "swift guanxi", defined as "a buyer's perception of a swiftly formed interpersonal relationship with a seller, which consists of mutual understanding, reciprocal favors, and relationship harmony" (ibid., 2014, 210). This concept emphasizes a form of guanxi that is quick and relatively shallow for the purpose to complete the transaction. It is built in an online setting through a set of CMC (Computer-mediated communication) tools like the feedback system and instant messaging that imitate the interpersonal nature of traditional guanxi executed in the offline environment. The authors suggest that high quality buyer-seller communication enables to build a trustful relationship which facilitate repeated transactions (ibid., 2014). These findings were confirmed by Chiu et al. (2018) who mentioned that vendor trust established thanks to swift guanxi is positively related to repurchase intentions. Nevertheless, Chiu et al. (2018) have also observed that swift guanxi have negative effect on product uncertainty and that in turn, unlike sellers' uncertainty, negatively affects the repurchase intentions (ibid.). Lin et al. (2019) have distinguished between swift guanxi built on the e-commerce grounds and guanxi emerging in the social commerce world. While on e-commerce platforms guanxi are built with the use of CMC tools, in social commerce communication they are facilitated by social media. These social interactions are not restricted to individual buyer with a seller but includes interactions with other buyers through online communities and forums. The social activities that consumers engage in with others help to gather a lot of valuable information and make a more empowered decision (Wang et al., 2012; Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Huang & Benyoucef, 2015, Lin et al. 2019).

3.3.2 The Role of Social Impact and The Influencers

The development of communication technologies and electronic devices have contributed to the innovation and empowerment of online social networks (OSN) and the emergence of related researches investigating the role of online social networks, communities and the influences projected among their participants. The online social networks have created an interactive and communicative global phenomenon that has enabled billions of users to connect to other individuals on various social media platforms (Penni, 2017). Among these users, there are also individuals who, thanks to their expertise, social ties and involvement are influential online, and who demonstrate their influence, not only on other people's opinions but also on other people's attitudes and behaviors (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007; Li & Du, 2011). Taking the complexity of social networks and the extensive analysis needed to investigate them, Hillman and Trier (2013) found that social influence theory can provide explanations to the complex processes in online social networks and the behavioral influences resulting from social interactions.

Social influence is ubiquitous in human societies (Izuma, 2017). It refers to the ways people alter the attitudes or behavior of others (Burger, 2001) and involves intentional and unintentional efforts to change another person’s beliefs, attitudes or behavior (Gass, 2015). Social influence often operates via peripheral processing, which means the target may be unaware of the influence attempt. Unlike compliance gaining, which is usually goal-directed, social influence is often non-goal directed and the outcomes may be inconsistent with, or unrelated to, a communicator’s goals (ibid.). As proposed by Kelman (1958), in social influence theory the influence of different social factors, the mechanism by which individuals will produce certain behavioral attitudes is different (Kelman, 1958). Kelman (1958) distinguishes three processes of attitude change: compliance, identity, and internalization. Compliance refers to an individual adopting an act in order to obtain favorable outcomes or to avoid punishment. Identity refers to an individual adopting an action in order to establish or maintain a good relationship with others or objectively believes that the opinions of others are accurate and useful. Internalization represents the strongest influence. It means that an individual believes that a certain behavior or a person matches his/her existing beliefs and interests and contributes to the optimization of his/her own value (ibid.).

In the internet era, social media began to be used more and more as a means for information gathering, therefore previous researchers have found informational social influence to be the most applicable for studies on social influence (Snijders & Helms, 2014). Lee et al. (2011), who investigated the impact of positive online reviews and discussions on consumers' decision making, explained this type of social influence as "accepting information or advice from a person who may not have previously been known as a friend or colleague" (Lee et al., 2011, 185). Informational social influence was found to be relevant in cases when consumers face limited knowledge about the product or limited time to make a decision. While this influence might be both negative and positive, a consumer does not necessarily take the actions that are suggested. Nevertheless, Lee et al. (2011) found that the positive influences strengthen the intention to shop (Lee et al., 2011). Recent scholars confirmed some of these findings when it comes to the relation between limited knowledge and the social influence. According to Yajing Diao et al. (2019), when consumers face limited information, they are more inclined to imitate the behavior of others. Moreover, in the case of incomplete information available, people will infer the product is good quality based on the purchase behavior of other consumers and the number of products sold (Yajing Diao et al., 2019).

As social interactions with other users were found to be strongly associated with purchase decisions (Wang et al., 2012, Tien at al., 2018), some scholars also investigated the role of social identification in connection with customer engagement that may lead to purchase intention, which was recognized by Kelman (1958) as the "identity" process. As social influence theory suggests, social interactions increase user's perception of intimacy and similarity with others. Especially, knowledge contribution in online communities has a direct influence on social identity (Cheng & Guo, 2015). In Prentice et al.'s (2018) study on Chinese consumers, identification with other members of an online community and identification with an online community were both found to have a significant impact on engagement, which may facilitate consumers' decision making.

Social interactions and social influence studies have given considerable attention to the role of people with substantial social effects on others. The people who are the most influential in their communities are often referred to as influencers, "big Vs" or opinion leaders (Li et al., 2013; Liu et al. 2015). They have been found to be very effective in spreading information within social networks in comparison to networks without opinion leaders (Liu et al. 2015). Moreover, they can affect decision-making and purchasing behavior of other consumers through various channels (Cho et al., 2015). Previous researchers named various sources of their influential power to guide people's behavior, including social prestige and high expertise, but also involvement and social ties, which help to create a favorable reputation and trust (Li et al., 2013; Li & Du, 2011; Xiong et al., 2018). Although, the great value of opinion leaders was recognized by marketers and practitioners, who try to utilize their influential power in word-of-mouth marketing and advertising, scholars observed that the identification of the right influencers in social network is not an easy task (Liu et al., 2015). According to Lazarsfeld et al. (1994), opinion leaders are formed and developed gradually through interaction with members in virtual communities. While they start as common members, their influencer status might be lost. Xiong et al. (2018) found that opinion leaders' status and social interaction ties are linked to the perceived knowledge contribution and reciprocity. Similarly, as opinion leaders should bring value to the followers in order to be influential, creating the social capital that is of interest for brands is the only way to monetize this influential power (Zulli, 2018). Besides, not every influencer is able to project their influence in every domain. Liu et al. (2015) proposed a new approach to analyze and identify influencers that takes into consideration the specific domain that the influencer is specializing in and the time dimension, namely influencers' influential power status across their popularity life cycle. Scholars identified three types of influencers, emerging influencers, holding influencers, and vanishing influencers. This was based on the observation that influencers specializing in certain areas are not as effective in endorsing content that does not fit their personal brand (Liu et al. 2015), which was also confirmed by findings of Xiong et al. (2018). This aspect is crucial, as Zhao et al. (2018) have found that opinion leaders' credibility is the most important in maximizing their influence on followers in e-commerce.

Besides all previous findings on the role and impact of influences, it is of great importance to highlight that there is still a lack of consensus among scholars and marketers on terminology and the characteristics that define different types of influencers or online celebrities (Rulz-Gomez, 2019). Terms used by scholars differ from the terms used by practitioners. Moreover, a wide range of different terms are used to describe amateurs or fame seekers and professionals with varying status (ibid). Therefore, the outcomes of previous research are difficult to apply without considering the meaning behind the terminology that is in use. According to Booth and Matic (2010), in order to identify valuable content creators for brands, a categorization of different players should be made. Rulz-Gomez (2019) proposed a distinction between traditional celebrity (movie stars, TV celebrities, entertainers, athletes, children of famous people etc.) and the self-made celebrity. The appearance of self-made celebrities (Turner, 2006; Turner, 2010; Gamson, 2011) was enabled largely due to social media and as mentioned previously, self-made celebrities are people that have become influencers from originally just being common users.

On the other hand, marketers and practitioners applied a categorization of micro, macro and mega influencers. These differ in status, audience size, the targeted consumer segment, as well as the corresponding influencing power, which ultimately defines the commercial value of an influencer. Although micro influencers have the smallest following, they were found to have the highest level of intimacy and engagement with their audience. They are considered experts in their respective fields and have a targeted follower base that perceives them as more authentic than well-known influencers (Bernazzani, 2018; Hatton, 2018). Macro influencers are known on more than one platform and their activities might have become a full-time profession, unlike micro-influencers. Lastly, mega influencers are recognized widely and have the same status as traditional celebrities (Rulz-Gomez, 2019).

In China most common term for different kinds of internet celebrities or influencers is Wanghong (网红). According to Qianqian Xiao (2017), this term includes professionals, internet celebrities, grassroots stars, traditional celebrities, livestreaming anchors, famous Taobao store owners, and a variety of famous people on social media who intentionally or unintentionally drive attention (Honghong Liu, 2013). There are several definitions of Wanghong from different perspectives. From communication studies' perspective, according to Honghong Liu (2013), Wanghongs are individuals or groups of people who, thanks to the development of Internet, are able to spread information quickly and efficiently. By doing so, they are drawing a lot of attention in the online world either intentionally or unintentionally. From economics' perspective, Wanghongs are able to turn the collected attention and following of different consumers into real sales and increased profits for brands. Still, the characteristic traits that distinguish Wanghong from others have not been clearly defined. According to Qianqian Xiao (2017), Wanghongs can be recognized by the distinctive charisma to affect others.

Wanghongs also fall upon the classification of micro-influencers (小 V - Small V) and macro-influencers (大 V - Big V). Among marketers and in Western popular media, they are mostly referred to as KOLs (key opinion leaders), top influencers or simply internet celebrities (JingDaily, 2018). In order to avoid confusion regarding the terminology related to different types of influencers, in this study the terms Wanghong, influencer and KOL are used interchangeably. These terms share the same meaning following the definition suggested by Rulz-Gomez (2019):

"Content creators who get attention and build social capital (...) are do-it-yourself social media users that create their own digital persona, create their own content and build their own audience. They must be able to draw attention to themselves and to products and have a considerable following to be of use for brands. This requires a set of practices, including becoming a brand themselves (and) offering a distinctive unique selling proposition" (Rulz-Gomez, 2019, 15).

The above definition includes both content creators that specialize in a certain field as well as non-professional content creators. However, as indicated in the definition, Wanghongs are not traditional celebrities, fame seekers or people who unintentionally drive public attention.

3.3.3 Word of Mouth and Trust

The above presented theories of social networks, social influences and the social influencers are closely related to the concepts of WOM and trust. According to Wang and Yu (2017), WOM theory is suitable for studying social interactions in social commerce. Moreover, as trust built through WOM was found to play a significant role both on e-commerce platforms and during the purchasing journey of Chinese consumers, these two aspects are discussed separately in this section (Ou et al., 2014; Wang & Yu, 2017).

It has been recognized by scholars that WOM affects consumers attitudes and purchasing decisions. It is said that 20% to 50% of all purchasing decisions are influenced by it (Kim et. al, 2016). Moreover, due to better accessibility of electronic WOM and user-generated content through different online channels, the influences may come from multiple directions (ibid.). Researchers have paid attention to the influences coming from the WOM communication and interactions between opinion leaders and consumers, as was presented in the previous section. Besides, different forms of communication between consumers have also been investigated extensively. According to Hajli et al. (2014), WOM is a form of social commerce construct that creates information through user-generated recommendations and reviews. Similarly, WOM communication was defined by Wang and Yu (2017) as "user-generated content conveying positive or negative information related to sellers and products/services that is disseminated and communicated within social networks." (Wang & Yu, 2017, 181). Exchanging this kind of product-related opinions and experiences with acquaintances through social media channels has been also referred by some scholars as the social WOM, due to social networking platform being the main channel for information exchange (Hajli et al., 2014). This term is not limited to communication with friends, but also other consumers and company representatives (ibid.). Hajli et al. (2014) observed that textual content WOM from peers in social commerce is more trusted than what the company provides.

Zhang et al. (2015) have previously investigated the impact of network of friends versus network of strangers and people's behavior, decisions and beliefs. The outcomes of that study showed that when both networks are small, friends' network will be more significant, while in the reverse situation the stranger's network is more effective. On the other hand, according to Li and Du (2017) social ties in offline social networks are argued to be stronger then online, which is why WOM in offline social networks is supposedly more effective, but similarly, due to the network effect, a big online network can create higher profits for the company.

Besides the distinction between friends' versus strangers' networks, Tien et al. (2018) perceived the credibility and the usefulness of the review to have a positive impact on the adoption of information. These two elements of the online WOM were proven to be crucial in building persuasion that leads to purchase intention (Tien et al. 2018). In addition, scholars made a distinction between positive and negative WOM. The e-NWOM (electronic negative WOM) has been found in previous studies to negatively affect consumers' attitudes, behaviors and future purchases, especially in cases where viewers of e-NWOM did not participate in the online discussion (Kim et al., 2016; Li & Du, 2017). Moreover, the impact of the negative conversational WOM has been found to be greater than the positive conversational WOM (Baker et al., 2015). Negative WOM was found to be more influential in product evaluation and decision making (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Prentice et al. 2019).

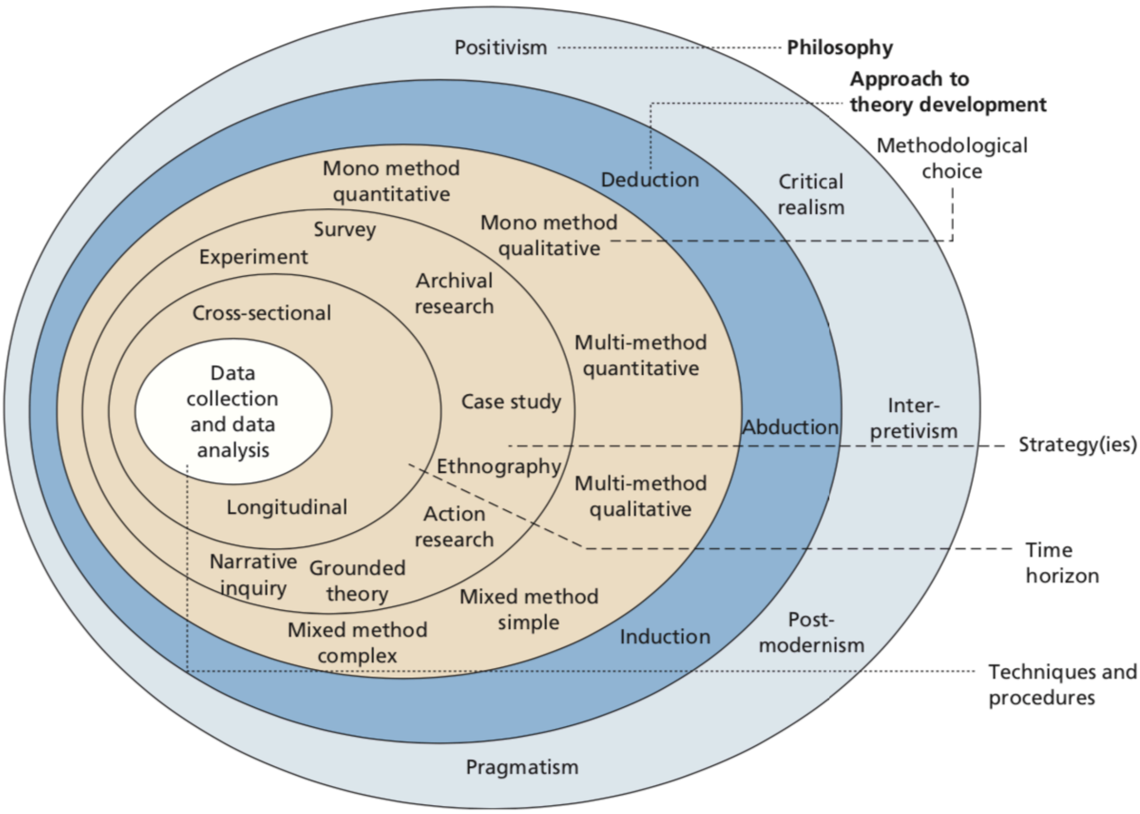
Previous scholars found a positive relation and impact of WOM on trust in online shopping setting (Zeba & Ganguli, 2016). The internet has become an essential business platform for trading, distributing and selling products between organizations, among organizations and consumers and even between consumers, and trust is believed to be the key to those relationships (Corbitt, Thanasankit & Yi, 2003). As Quelch and Klein (1996) noted, "trust is a critical factor in stimulating purchases over the Internet" (Quelch & Klein, 1996, 70). While Keen (1997) argues that the most significant long-term barrier for realizing the potential of internet marketing to consumers was the lack of consumer trust. Trust has an important influence on consumer activities and thereby on e-commerce success. Ganesan (1994) even believes that there is a causal relationship between trust and commerce: trust is responsible for creating consumer activity. Whereas, Jarvenpaa et al. (1997) argues that online retailers might increase consumer trust and thereby increase the willingness of prospective customers to shop on the internet. On the internet, customers typically perceive higher risk compared to a conventional shopping environment, as a result of distance, virtual identity and lack of regulation. Therefore, trust is the preliminary condition to consumers' e-commerce participation. In Corbitt, Thanasankit & Yi's (2003) paper, the authors have argued that, trust, as a critical factor in e-commerce, is influenced predominantly by three sources: e-commerce reputation in general, the consumers, and the specific e-commerce website. They explained that the impression of e-commerce as a whole has a strong impact on willingness to trust online shopping, the general credibility of e-commerce strongly influences the decision of whether or not to adopt online shopping at all. However, individual websites influence the decision on which website to purchase from. Customers' own experiences and attitudes also affect their decision-making process (Corbitt, Thanasankit & Yi, 2003). According to Haiji et al. (2017), the importance of trust in online shopping cannot be undermined, however it is even more important in social commerce environment, where user-generated content plays a crucial role.

David De Cremer (2015) has indicated that depending on one's cultural background, trust could be built and defined in various ways. Trust is not only different in online or offline environments, but it can also vary from region to region. In order to better illustrate the difference between the West's and China's approach to the trust issue and how it is being built, De Cremer (2015) used the concept of trust default. In the Western cultural context, trust is usually perceived as a positive expectation of the other party being trustworthy until he/she does something that will break this expectation. While in China, the default is oriented more towards distrust and this attitude is very well reflected in a popular Chinese saying which illustrates the reluctance or desire to avoid any social risks: "early birds get shot" (qiang da chu tou niao) (Zhu, 2001, 11). In China, trust is a core element of interpersonal and business relations. Building trust where one needs to prove oneself of being trustworthy first and establish feelings of safety when it comes to preserving both parties' best interests is of the utmost importance before any cooperation can be established. The knowledge of this cultural difference is especially important for brands and companies operating on the Chinese market and should be considered in order to eliminate distrust and build trust in the Chinese context (De Cremer, 2015).

4. Methodology

This section will be constructed according to the "research onion" suggested by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015), which is presented below. Crotty (1998) suggested that in order to reach to the central point of the onion, namely the data collection and data analysis, the selected approach approaches methods for data collection and analysis should be clearly explained to begin with. Therefore, our research steps from outside towards the inside of the onion will be introduced gradually. In section 4.1, the research philosophy is presented, followed by the introduction of the research approach that has been selected in section 4.2, where methods of data collection and undertaken approach to theory development, methodological choices and strategy can be found. Section 4.3 focuses on the pragmatic steps of data collection and analysis, techniques and procedures.

Figure 4: The Research "Onion"



(Source: Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015)

4.1 Research Philosophy

The term research philosophy refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge (Saunders, 2009). Once we have a topic in mind to study, we must consider how to approach and investigate it. Each researcher has their own view of what constitutes the truth and knowledge. Business and management researchers do not agree on one best philosophy (Tsoukas & Knudsen, 2003). In addition, each research philosophy contributes something unique and valuable to business and management research, representing a different and distinctive perspective on organisational realities (Morgan, 1986).

Social scientists have been debating on how social science research should be carried out and as an outcome, two opposite ways have been brought up: positivism and social constructionism. Positivism indicates that the social reality is an objective existence (Comte & Martineau, 1853) and believes that there is only one true reality (universalism). Social constructionism suggests that reality is socially constructed and encourages innovation (Berger & Luckmann, 1991), where researchers can develop new understandings and novel theoretical interpretations of studied life (Charmaz, 2008). The chart below outlines the implications of positivism and social constructionism.

Table 1: Contrasting Implications of Positivism and Social Constructionism

	Positivism	**Social constructionism**
The observer	must be independent	is part of what is being observed
Human interests	should be irrelevant	are the main drivers of science
Explanations	must demonstrate causality	aim to increase general understanding of the situation
Research progresses through	hypotheses and deductions	gathering rich data from which ideas are induced

Concepts	need to be defined so that they can be measured	should incorporate stakeholder perspectives
Unite of analysis	should be reduced to simplest terms	may include the complexity of “whole” situations
Generalization through	statistical probability	theoretical abstraction
Sampling requires	large numbers selected randomly	small numbers of cases chosen for specific reasons

(Source: Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012)

Positivism is a philosophical theory stating that certain (“positive”) knowledge is based on natural phenomena and their properties and relations. It asserts that all authentic knowledge allows verification and that all authentic knowledge assumes that the only valid knowledge is scientific (Larrain, 1979). On the other hand, social constructionism focuses on social practices that people engage in and claims that knowledge and reality are constructed based on interactions and communication between people in a society, meaning that all the metaphysical quantities we take for granted are learned from other people around us (Owen, 1995 in Galbin, 2014).

The perspective of social constructionism has been selected as the best fit for this research, due to the goal of our study which seeks to explain how seemingly objective features are constituted by subjective meanings of individuals and groups (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), i.e. we focus mostly on customers’ experiences with social commerce and wish to make practical suggestions for brands and platforms based on the customers’ experiences. In other words, because social commerce, as presented previously, is based on social interactions and relationships formed between different individuals, adapting social constructionism may help to reveal how the individuals and groups participate in the construction of social commerce and at the same time, broaden our understanding of the social commerce phenomenon in China. As the aim of social constructionists is to increase general knowledge of the situation, this research will incorporate three perspectives of different stakeholders of social commerce, customers, platforms and companies in order to comprehend how social commerce is perceived and utilized. According to social constructionists, the way people think is guiding their actions, therefore there is no "one true reality" in all people's experiences and perceptions. The meanings and knowledge are developed in coordination with others rather than separately within each individual. Hence, the findings of social constructionism research may not be definitive, but present one of the discourses. Although social constructionism accepts that there is an objective reality, it places greater emphasis on how interactions and communication between people construct their reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Therefore, in order to comprehensively understand social commerce in China and its complexity as well as to gain further insight into its potential for different stakeholders, this study also focuses greatly on experiences and perceptions of the participants of social commerce. In addition, functionalities of the platforms are studied to reveal the "objective reality" (ibid.) in the social commerce concept.

4.2 Research Approach to Theory Development

As suggested by Saunders et al. (2009), depending on the emphasis of research and the nature of the research topic, we shall decide on our research approach. A topic on which there is a wealth of literature that help researchers to define a theoretical framework and hypotheses leads itself more readily to deductive research. With research on a topic that is new, with much debate and on which there is little existing literature, it may be more appropriate to work inductively by generating data and analysing and reflecting upon what theoretical themes the data is suggesting (Saunders et al., 2009). However, Saunders also indicates that it is possible to combine deduction and induction within the same piece of research. Before deciding on an approach, inductive and deductive approach are briefly introduced. The inductive approach, also known as inductive reasoning, starts with the observations, while theories are proposed towards the end of the research process as a result of observations (Goddard & Melville, 2004). It "involves the search for pattern from observation and the development of explanations – theories – for those patterns through series of hypotheses" (Bernard, 2011, 7). No theories or hypotheses would apply in inductive studies at the beginning of the research and the researcher is free in terms of altering the direction for the study after the research process has begun (Saunders, 2012). Deductive research is at the opposite and it involves the development of a theory that is subjective to evaluate propositions or hypotheses related to an existing theory (Saunders et al., 2009). Since the main focus of this research paper is on the social commerce phenomenon in China, which became popular in recent years and is still lacking a comprehensive overview in previous literature, we base our study on the limited existing literature and background knowledge to form our research emphasis and guide our research direction. Hence, we see our research as predominantly inductive.

4.3 Research Design

The following table is made to provide an overview delineating what is included in the next sections, namely the research design, data collection and data analysis.

Table 2: Research Design, Data Collection and Data Analysis

	CONSUMERS	BRANDS	PLATFORMS
METHOD	Focus group & In-depth interview	In-depth interview	Secondary data analysis
DATA COLLECTION	Primary	Primary	Mostly-secondary
DATA ANALYSIS	Coding	Coding	Framework

(Source: Personal collection)

This research is a multi-method qualitative study that seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspective of the involved stakeholders. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about values, opinions, behaviours and social contexts of particular populations (Family Health International & Mack, 2005). This paper seeks to understand how people perceive and use social commerce. Based on previous literature (Han & Trimi, 2017; Wang & Zhang, 2012; Zhang & Benjamin, 2007), we can identify three main stakeholders of social commerce: platforms, customers, and brands. These will serve as the three perspectives from which the research is conducted to understand the full scope of social commerce. Different research methods will be used to study these three perspectives. Multi-method research enables the qualitative researcher to study relatively complex entities or phenomena in a way that is holistic and retains meaning. The purpose is to tackle the research objective from all methodological sides. Rather than pigeonholing the research into a series of different methods, the multi-method approach enables the researcher to immerse into the subject matter (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Therefore, in this research, secondary data analysis is mainly used to analyse the platforms, focus group interviews are used to gain customers' insight while in-depth interviews are conducted with market experts, in order to gain the perception from the brand's side.

4.3.1 Secondary Data Method

In order to gain more insight into the Chinese social commerce landscape and the social commerce platforms which are an important part of this landscape, the secondary data collection and analysis method has been adopted. The concept of secondary data analysis first emerged with Glaser's discussion of re-analysing data "which was originally collected for other purposes" (Glaser, 1963, 11). Yet, only few frameworks are available to guide researchers as they conduct secondary data analysis (Andrews et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2011). Researchers leverage secondary data analysis in an attempt to answer a new research question, or to examine an alternative perspective on the original question of a previous study (Forley, 2018). One of the most noticeable advantages of using secondary data analysis is its cost effectiveness (ibid.), which can save the researchers' money, time and effort on data that have already been collected by previous scholars. Another benefit of analysing secondary data instead of collecting and analysing primary data is the sheer volume and breadth of data that is publicly available today (ibid.), which means some of the data gathered by parties like the government or professional institutions was impossible to be acquired by scholars. In our case, gathering secondary data concerning social commerce platforms in China, as their annual reports, can extend our understanding of their performance and functionalities, which in turn is beneficial for gaining a better comprehension of consumers' usage of these platforms. On the other hand, as noted by Forley (2018), the biggest disadvantage of performing secondary data analysis is that the secondary data set might not be sufficient to answer the researcher's specific research question. Since the researcher did not collect the data, they have no control over what is contained in the data set. Often times, this can limit the analysis or alter the original questions the researcher sought to answer. Hence, the information should be carefully filtered, so that the collected knowledge serves its purpose. Additionally, the researcher does not know exactly how the data collection process was done or how well it was carried out. Therefore, he should read between the lines in order to uncover any potential limitations of the data (Crossman, 2019). In this paper, the collected secondary data is used to investigate the platform's perspective and it will be discussed in combination with primary data collected during the focus groups and individual interviews in order to diminish the potential limitations of relying solely on secondary information.

4.3.2 Focus Groups

Social science researchers in general and qualitative researchers in particular often rely on focus groups to collect data from multiple individuals simultaneously (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Focus groups are less threatening to many research participants, and this environment is helpful for participants to more freely discuss their perceptions, ideas, opinions and thoughts (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Therefore, in order to fulfil the objective of uncovering the customers' perceptions, experiences and behaviours in social commerce, focus group interviews are conducted in this study.

Krueger and Casey (2000) suggested that there are some additional benefits of choosing focus groups as a data collection method. One is that focus groups are an economical, fast and efficient method for obtaining data from multiple participants, thereby potentially increasing the overall number of participants in a given qualitative study. Another advantage is the socially oriented environment of a focus group. Moreover, the sense of belonging to a group can increase participants' sense of cohesiveness and therefore, increase the chance for them to speak up (Peters, 1993). Duggleby (2005) also indicates that focus groups can encourage participants to discuss personal experiences and identify problems, thereby providing possible solutions. This method appears to be especially helpful for social constructionists who seek to understand how interactions between participants construct their reality or how their experiences construct their perceptions and meanings. On the other hand, there are also certain disadvantages of this method as risk of "peer pressure" or being biased toward opinions of other participants that will be discussed further in section 6.5.

4.3.3 In-depth Interviews

Minichiello et. al. (1990) describe the in-depth interview as “repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants’ perspectives on their lives, experiences or situations as expressed in their own words” (Minichiello, 2019, 19). An interview is an important qualitative research method in which the researcher collects data directly from the participants. Mostly paired with other research methods like surveys and focus groups, interviews are significant in unfolding opinions, experiences, values and various other aspects of the population under study (Showkat, 2017). In-depth interviews are also used for exploring concepts for further investigation and descriptive analysis. Hence, the interviewer needs to develop a relation with the respondent to achieve a complete understanding of the respondent’s perspective (ibid.). For this study, in-depth interviews are conducted with the selected participants after focus group interviews, to serve as a supplement in order to clarify all aspects regarding our topics of interest and also give us a chance to gain deeper knowledge about consumers’ understanding of social commerce and motives that guide their behaviour. In-depth interviews are also conducted with market experts, which are supposed to reveal their experiences with social commerce in China.

4.4 Data Collection

As introduced in the previous section, in order to fully understand social commerce as well as its activities, both primary and secondary data is collected. In the following section, specifics on how the data was collected on all three perspectives, including platform, consumer and brand, are presented.

4.4.1 Secondary Data

In a time where vast amounts of data are being collected and archived by researchers all over the world, the practicality of utilizing existing data for research is becoming more prevalent (Andrews, et al., 2012). The utilization of existing data provides a viable option for researchers who may have limited time and resources (Johnston, 2014). This research firstly presents general information on the platforms using secondary sources like annual reports and presentations, market reports and journals as well as newspapers and media interviews. Apart from general information of the platforms, in order to assess social commerce features of the selected platforms, a framework developed by Han and Trimi (2017) has been adopted. This framework has been created to evaluate the performance of social commerce which is in line with the goal of this research. In addition, it was assessed to be suitable for regional, national as well as global companies, regardless of the size (Han & Trimi, 2017). The collected primary data in combination with the data on platforms analysed according to this framework will help us to address and answer the research questions that guide this paper.

4.4.1.1 Platform Selection

The platforms were chosen through purposive sampling as researchers want cases that are particularly informative (Saunders et al., 2007). Han et al. (2018) have divided the social commerce into three types: e-commerce platforms with social features, social media platforms with e-commerce features and lastly fusion of social media and e-commerce. Based on this categorization, we selected six platforms to conduct our research on: Taobao, Pinduoduo, Weibo, WeChat, Xiaohongshu and Douyin. These platforms are chosen because we believe that they are able to meet the research objectives and help answer the research question based on the following reasons. Taobao is the representative of e-commerce platforms with social features. This platform currently is the world's biggest e-commerce website according to Alexa (2019) and in recent years, it has been putting efforts to extend its social functionalities in order to support social commerce activities (Wang, 2016). Similarly, Pinduoduo is also a representative of this category. This platform was launched in 2015 and it is already a third biggest marketplace in the country, was named the "leading app for social commerce in China" (Graziani, 2018a). WeChat and Weibo were chosen as social media platforms with e-commerce features. Both platforms are among the most popular social media platforms in China that are often compared with Western counterparts in the social commerce context (Lo & Tong, 2018). Moreover, they are considered the "core purchase drivers" in China by the Nielsen Company (Nielsen, 2018b, 8). Lastly, Xiaohongshu and Douyin are more recent platforms, which introduced new trends into online shopping environment in China, each of them having their own characteristics. Xiaohongshu is one of the pioneers of social commerce in China, often raised as a successful example of social commerce player that gained an increased attention due to its fast-paced growth (Deng, 2018). Douyin is the world's fastest growing platform that combines video content with social commerce functions (Zhu, 2018; Liang, 2018). Because of its high popularity in recent years and growing demand for video content in China that was pointed out in the background section, it has been chosen as a representative of the third type of social commerce that combines social and commercial features.

4.4.2 Primary Data

The research question and research design ultimately guide how the focus group is constructed (Morgan, 1997). Therefore, the interview guide for focus groups that can be found in the appendix 3 is closely related to the research questions guiding this paper.

The focus groups in this study were designed and conducted according to the guidelines suggested by Krueger and Casey (2002). The interview guide designed for the focus groups consists of questions that were created in order to generate discussions and encourage participants to exchange opinions. Dichotomous questions have been avoided and the emphasis has been put on the open-ended questions as past experiences and reflections. Our role was mainly as moderators, directing the conversation, moderating and taking notes. Both direct and indirect questions have been asked, including participants understanding of the social commerce concept or personal experiences related to social commerce platforms in China. Especially by asking “why” and “how” questions regarding participants choices, preferences and usage of certain social commerce platforms, we are able to obtain a deeper understanding of participants’ behaviour and different influences on their choices and actions as well as the main issues and features that the consumers attach most importance to.

For the interviews with the market experts, we as qualitative researchers have conducted semi-structured interviews. The interview questions have been designed to get a better understanding of how brand owners and market experts utilize social commerce and what are their experiences with social commerce in China. There has been no fixed sequence followed during the interviews, rather, the questions were asked about a specific area and as the conversation developed, different questions appeared (Showkat, 2017) (see in-depth interview guide in Appendix 1.).

4.4.2.1 Primary Data Sampling

Focus Group Sampling

In total, two focus groups are selected with Chinese consumers, as they will have more experiences and knowledge about the social commerce environment in China. Ten Chinese citizens from different backgrounds were selected and divided into two groups. The sizes of the focus groups are four and six people respectively. The participants were between the ages of 22 and 32, since this age group was found to be more likely to engage with online activities on online shopping and social media platforms (Sorce et. al, 2005). Besides, people among this age group have a relatively stronger consumption power and they have might hence have more online shopping experiences on online platforms (ibid.).

In-Depth Interview Sampling

In order to have a comprehensive understanding of social commerce, we also need to explore this topic from the perspective of brands. Hence, it is important to organize the in-depth interview with market experts who are professionals experienced with the Chinese digital world and in particular, the social commerce environment. We approached three experts in Denmark who all have rich experience with operating in Chinese market, namely company representatives from NihaoCPH, BingBang and Ehub Nordic. They have been chosen as interviewees since they are professionals who help Danish and international businesses to establish their positions and presence in China. Bing Bang conducted many successful projects with several small Nordic brands in China, while Ehub Nordic and NihaoCPH worked with both small brands and big renowned brands. Through their experiences with social commerce in China combined with our platform and customer findings, we will be able to analyse the whole landscape of social commerce and build a clearer understanding of its concept and future development potential.

4.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis is the most important component of research (Bhatia, 2018). Weak analysis produces inaccurate results that not only hamper the authenticity of the research, but also make the findings unusable. It is therefore imperative to choose data analysis methods carefully to ensure that findings are insightful and actionable (ibid.). In the following sections, secondary data and primary data analysis are introduced separately.

4.5.1 Secondary Data Analysis

Secondary analysis is an empirical exercise that applies the same basic research principles as studies utilizing primary data and has steps to be followed just like any research method. The secondary data analysis is based on the adapted framework for social commerce platform assessment developed by Trimi and Han (2017), consisting of four components: social-related exchange activities, information, technology and management. However, the framework is moderated to fit the Chinese context so that the selected platforms with their relevant features can be analysed. Based on the secondary data collected and the aforementioned framework, a chart in the Appendix 11 has been created, presenting the functions that are possessed by each platform grouped into the four components. The framework will be further explained in more detail in chapter 5.2.

4.5.2 Primary Data Analysis

In order to benefit from the findings in the best possible way, to achieve a solid foundation for the analysis and ensure valid argumentation, it is significant to have an overview of all the relevant statements and expressions found in the research. The data is processed with coding, which reduces and structures large interview texts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Since interviews do not always run as expected, conversations can take an unexpected turn and open up a new area for a researcher to explore, which means that the same interview questions might be addressing different aspects of the problem, and coding the data gives the researchers a way to organize their scripts in such that we can pull the scripts from the same code effectively without looking through the entire interview questions again (Yi, 2018). Our coding process was based on the transcripts of the focus groups and in-depth interviews. First, line-by-line coding method has been employed. Then, the participants' statements were put into categories, where similar codes are put into the same categories and then moved around in order to find out a way that reflects our analysis the best. Nevertheless, since the coding was done with the research questions in mind, only the parts that assist in an improved understanding of the phenomenon of social commerce were transcribed and analysed, while irrelevant parts regarding other topics were disregarded. The categorization of codes reflects themes which are established after the transcriptions were reviewed. Following this method, the bigger categories are the overarching themes while the sub-categories supporting themes. The themes can tell the same story from different perspectives or several different stories that connect with each other. This way, with great narratives created from the themes, the messy qualitative data can be in a meaningful order (Yi, 2018).

In order to assess saturation in general and across-group saturation in particular, constant comparison analysis has been used. Developed by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987), focus group data can be analysed via constant comparison analysis, especially when there are multiple focus groups within the same study. Because focus group data is analysed by looking at one focus group at a time, analysis of multiple focus groups effectively serves as a proxy for theoretical sampling, which is when additional sampling occurs to assess the meaningfulness of the themes and to refine themes (Charmaz, 2000). Thus, we use two groups to assess if the themes that emerged from the first group also emerged from the other group. Doing so helps us reach data saturation and/or theoretical saturation.

4.6 Validity and Reliability

Patton (2002) states that validity and reliability are two factors which any qualitative researcher should be concerned about while designing a study, analysing results and judging the quality of the study. This corresponds to the question "how can in inquirer persuade his or her audience that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 290). The validity and reliability of the research are evaluated in order to assess the quality of the research. The validity of the research is concerned with whether the thesis investigate what it intends to investigate (Kvale & Brinkman, 2008). Bond (2003) commented that validity is foremost on the minds of those developing measures and that genuine scientific measurement is foremost in the minds of those who seek valid outcomes from assessment. Validity can be seen as the core of any form of assessment that is trustworthy and accurate (Bond, 2003). Validity of research can be explained as an extent at which requirements of scientific research methods have been followed during the process of generating research findings. Oliver (2010) considers validity to be a compulsory requirement for all types of studies, while reliability refers to the extent to which the same answers can be obtained using the same instruments more than one time. It is a concern every time a single observer is the source of data, because we have no certain guard against the impact of that observer's subjectivity (Babbie, 2010). Validity of this research will be discussed first and reliability will be talked about in the later section.

4.6.1 Internal Validity

Internal validity refers to how well a research is done, especially whether it avoids confounding. The less chance for confounding in a study, the higher its internal validity. Even though our research does not concern inferences about measurable relationships like in quantitative research, as an explorative and descriptive study, we must also have internal validity in its execution. To achieve internal validity, we make sure that what we get from the research is what is intended. Hence, we use interpretative questions during the focus group and in-depth interviews such as "what do you mean by...?", to make sure the answers are understood by the moderators. Moreover, when the respondents' responses express what they think is the correct answer according to the social norms, we ask what their real perceptions are when they indicate something regarded as a social desirability bias (McGivern, 2006), especially during the follow-up interviews. By adopting the above actions, we can minimize risk of internally invalid research.

4.6.2 External Validity

External validity is the validity of applying the conclusions of a scientific study outside the context of that study (Mitchell & Jolley, 2001). In other words, it is the extent to which the results of a study can be generalized. In general, the results of the platform studies are difficult to generalize due to the case-specific nature. However, with our social constructionist approach, we do not primarily seek to be able to generalize these findings beyond, rather, we try to understand the case in itself. Kvale and Brinkman (2008) also argue that context dependent knowledge becomes of more value than general knowledge. In our research, we carefully choose the platforms, focus groups and in-depth interview participants and study different platforms that are utilizing social commerce, combine the perspectives of consumers and brands. Hence, this research generates a comprehensive view on the phenomenon in China and can therefore improve the external validity.

4.6.3 Reliability

Reliability is a concept that refers to producing consistent results time after time. Since the authors of this paper all have different cultural backgrounds and various language abilities, in order to ensure the reliability of the research, we conducted the focus group interviews, and in-depth interviews with the interviewees, so that the interview participants can express their opinions accurately. Also, the interviews are transcribed and analysed by our two Chinese-native researchers to minimize the unreliability of this research. By conducting the follow-up semi-structured interviews, we got an opportunity to “follow up on promising new feelings” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2008, 272), which is argued to be important in qualitative studies, since too strong a focus on reliability might in fact be harmful to creativity.

5. Findings and Analysis

In this chapter findings of the three most vital components of social commerce – platforms, customers and brands will be presented successively. Platforms findings are presented first, as it will help the readers of this paper get a thorough understanding of the major platforms active in social commerce at the beginning and better comprehend the content of the customer and market experts' interviews. After presenting the findings on platforms, customers and brands, analysis will be made for each perspective. In the end, a summary will be made to stress the highlights or the main issues regarding social commerce in China found in this research.

5.1 Platforms

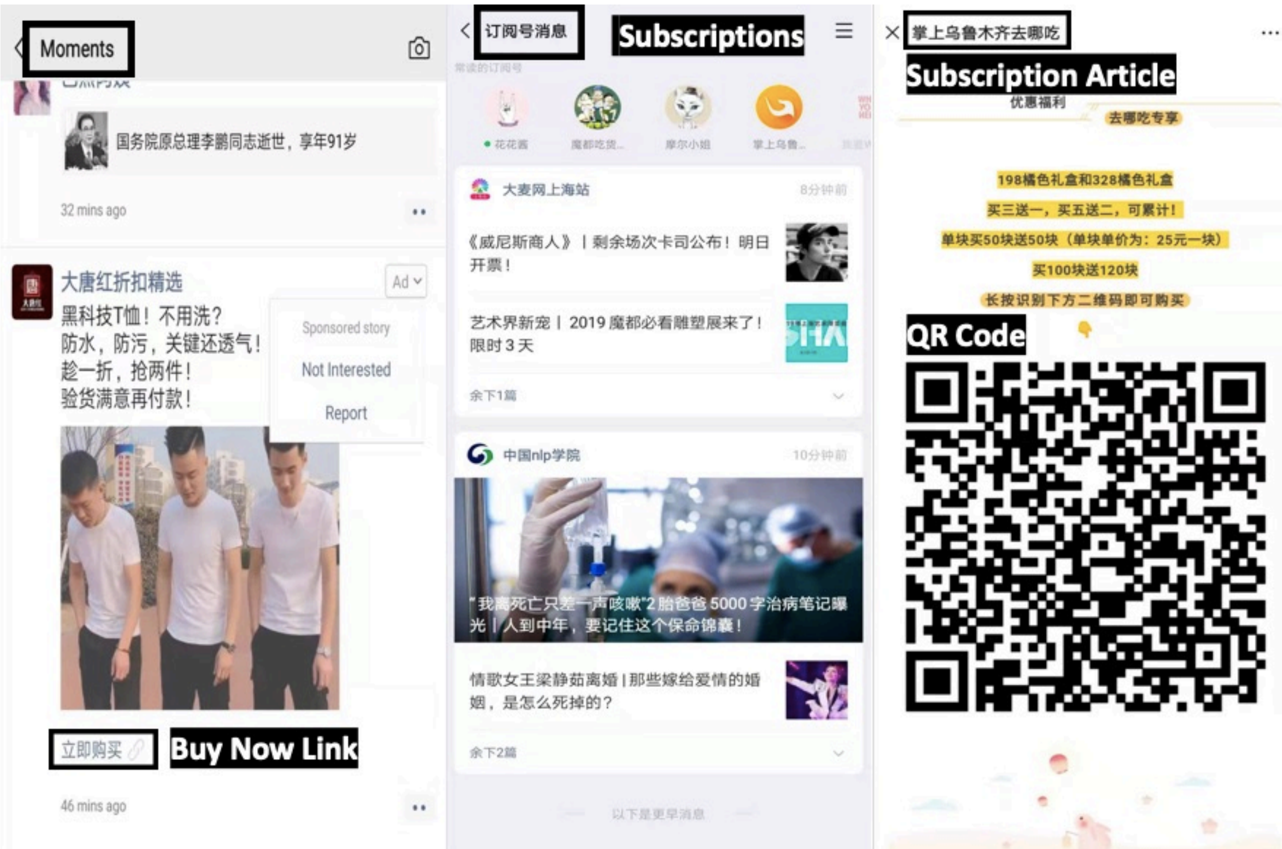
In this section, findings based on secondary data related to the selected Chinese social commerce platforms including Pinduoduo, Taobao, Weibo, Douyin, WeChat and Xiaohongshu will be presented. For each platform a general introduction will be made, including an explanation of the main features and functionalities, user demographic and provided main types of content as well as other unique characteristics that vary from platform to platform. Then, platform-specific social commerce features will be individually described and analyzed after a general introduction. In the analysis part, based on findings collected from secondary and primary data, different types of social commerce platforms will be distinguished. Later, based on a social commerce framework adapted from Han and Trimi (2017), the performance of these platforms with regards to their social commerce features and activities will be assessed.

5.1.1 WeChat

WeChat is a mobile application launched by Tencent in 2011, which provides instant messaging services. As the most representative social platform with 1.3 billion registered users in China, WeChat is defined as "a lifestyle" thanks to its comprehensive features. WeChat relies mainly on interpersonal relationships and provides a platform for messaging, social networking, information acquisition, and entertainment. For messaging as well as networking, WeChat provides various forms of communication by sending voice, pictures and text messages. For information acquisition and entertainment, users can share their experiences and interact with their friends' circle in WeChat Moments. Besides, users can also follow their favourite brands and content creators through WeChat Subscription Accounts, which are the official accounts that play a role of websites in the WeChat ecosystem. Similarly, the Mini program feature is a sub-application within WeChat that enables e-commerce functions or other services that can be linked to the official accounts or function separately as a mini-program, like for instance JD.com marketplace mini-program (Graziani, 2018b). WeChat mini-programs do not need to be downloaded and installed separately which means that WeChat users do not need to leave the platform to accomplish a purchase. According to Li Mi (2018), this combination of Subscription Accounts offering content linked with the Mini programs solves the major problems of traditional e-commerce when it comes to high costs of obtaining traffic (Li Mi, 2018). By the end of 2018, the number of the mini-programs in WeChat was over 2 million and the number of daily active users reached 170 million (Tencent, 2018). Besides WeChat mini-programs, official WeChat accounts can also make use of other integrated WeChat shops provided by the third-party, such as Wedian and Youzan. According to WeChat Social Commerce Report published last year by the biggest WeChat shop platform in China, Youzan, and country's largest social media data monitoring platform, Newrank, the number of in-app WeChat stores is growing by 68% year over year, which indicates that this feature enjoys big popularity (Newrank & Youzan, 2018). In addition, "WeChat Pay" function helps users conduct transactions and complete purchases through WeChat shops and mini-programs. Thanks to its convenience, throughout recent years it has become one of China's leading mobile payment platforms (Zhang, 2018).

WeChat is a platform that showed a tremendous success in adapting to market trends and emerging needs. Within a year of launching, the number of total registered WeChat users reached over 300 million. Even though in 2012 WeChat was still being used mainly as a communication tool, other functions as WeChat Moments were drawing huge attention among users. The monthly active users in the same year rose by 22% with the number of 247 million (Tencent, 2012). WeChat developed fast to adapt to the changing market and user demands. Soon later, it started to focus on enhancing commercial activities on the platform. WeChat started to provide O2O services via cooperation with daily life services business (Dianping.com), e-commerce (JD.com) and public information platforms (Sougou). Moreover, WeChat enhanced the social infrastructure through sharing and comments across different platforms with single login account, which greatly boosted user stickiness. As a result, the monthly active users of 2013 achieved massive growth with 121% and the number reached 355 million. In May of 2014, Tencent announced to establish Weixin Group (WXG), which means WeChat completes the first phase and steps into the phase of upgrading (Tencent, 2014). The guiding theme of 2014 for WeChat was to "Connect", with the main aim focused at optimizing the user experience of O2O. At the same time, another significant growth achieved by the company was through the advertisements' profits collected through WeChat Subscription Accounts. To maintain the leading position in the Chinese market, WeChat kept carrying out the "Connect" strategy in 2015. In this year, the monthly active users increased by 39% more than the same period in 2014 and approached 697 million. WeChat Subscription Accounts have become the main tool to connect users with brands, meanwhile, the advertising function in WeChat Moments is designed to attract users (Tencent, 2015). Advertising in WeChat Moments allows the brands to advertise in the users' friends circle timeline, so while people scroll through their feed, they typically have an option to interact with such ads. Users will see up to one WeChat Moment ads every 48 hours, and the Ad will disappear within six hours if the user did not interact with it. Users can also choose "not interested" option to prevent this ad as well as similar WeChat Moments ad from reappearing in the future. On the other hand, if users interact with the ad, this will increase the likelihood of their friends receiving same ad content, which increases the chances for this particular ad to have viral effect (Graziani, 2018b; Li Mi, 2018).

Figure 5: WeChat User Interface



(Source: WeChat app, 2019)

(Source: WeChat app, 2019)

Wechat's Social Commerce Features

WeChat forms a very complex and rather closed ecosystem with a vast number of different features. The network of WeChat is mainly based on the personal contact list and there is no follow function, which makes it difficult for the users to build up relationship with strangers. However, there are still certain functions that make Social commerce possible and even popular in WeChat.

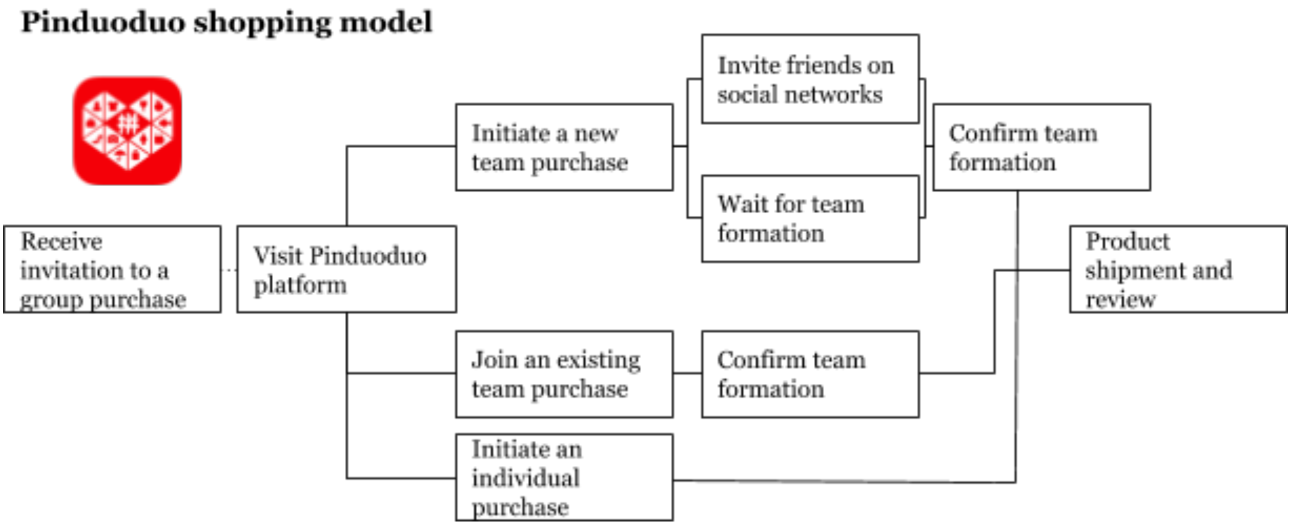
On WeChat, users and their friends are able to create a WeChat group, where they can share the purchase links to mini-programs, subscription articles and QR codes that lead to product listings, together with their own reviews or opinions on the products. The WeChat social sharing activities enabled by these features are essential in the whole purchasing process, from pre-purchase to post-purchase stages. WeChat users can go straight from the group chat to the friend's recommended product pages and complete the purchase by paying immediately using WeChat Pay. Later, user can send product recommendations or share their opinions in WeChat Moments or group chats. The four core WeChat features supporting social commerce activities can be distinguished in Subscription Accounts, advertising in WeChat Moments, Mini-programs and WeChat shops, demonstrated in the pictures above. Subscription accounts and advertising in WeChat Moments both support content-driven product discoveries and enable followers to interact with the article by means of comments, rewards (with money) and sharing their own posts in Moments. Mini-programs and WeChat shops as Weidian or Youzan, together with WeChat Pay, support commercial activities on WeChat.

5.1.2 Pinduoduo

Pinduoduo is a Chinese mobile shopping app that was established in September 2015. As stated on Pinduoduo's website, it was designed to unite people together, enable purchase of better quality products at lower prices and at the same time, create a fun experience. Within 3 years of the platform's operation, Pinduoduo gathered 273 million monthly active users (Pinduoduo, 2019).

The success of Pinduoduo can be explained to a great extent with its effective customer segmentation. Targeting customers who are price sensitive, Pinduoduo knows that what they need are products that are highly cost-effective (Ma, 2018). It offers products at up to 20 percent cheaper compared to their market price (Henriques, 2019). Pinduoduo allows consumers to buy directly from manufacturers and due to its group-buying model (tuangou 拼团) based on bulk purchases, it leaves room for sellers to cut prices and removes the hassle and additional costs of using an additional layer of distributors. The Pinduoduo users tend to like the feeling of getting a bargain and sharing the feeling with people around brings them happiness (Ma, 2018). The promotive features of Pinduoduo have covered different types of customers. For the buyers who have a clear view of what they need, Pinduoduo came up with the plan of group-buying/bargaining, push their friends to generate their buying wish and increase the chance of purchases. For the customers with unclear buying wish, Pinduoduo offers various promotional activities, including free products, cash bonuses for daily sign-ups and new users, flash sales with coupons and red pockets as well as gamified shopping experience elements, leading potential customers to the product page, and stimulating the users to browse the product. The coupons can also be saved and stored for future purchases by the customers who currently do not have any buying wish. Hence, these users can be attracted to return to Pinduoduo platform in the future when they are ready to buy something. As Pinduoduo is functioning mainly as a mobile app, but also as WeChat's mini program within the WeChat ecosystem, most of the transactions on Pinduoduo are completed via WeChat Pay (Wang, 2018). The strategic cooperation with Tencent and WeChat Pay has not only made it more convenient for consumers to complete purchases with automatic payments, but also to share content and shopping links with their friend's circle on WeChat and QQ through QR codes and sharing links. Easy user sharing through social media platforms not only boosted the popularity of Pinduoduo, but also significantly lowered costs of marketing and advertising for sellers on the platform (ibid).

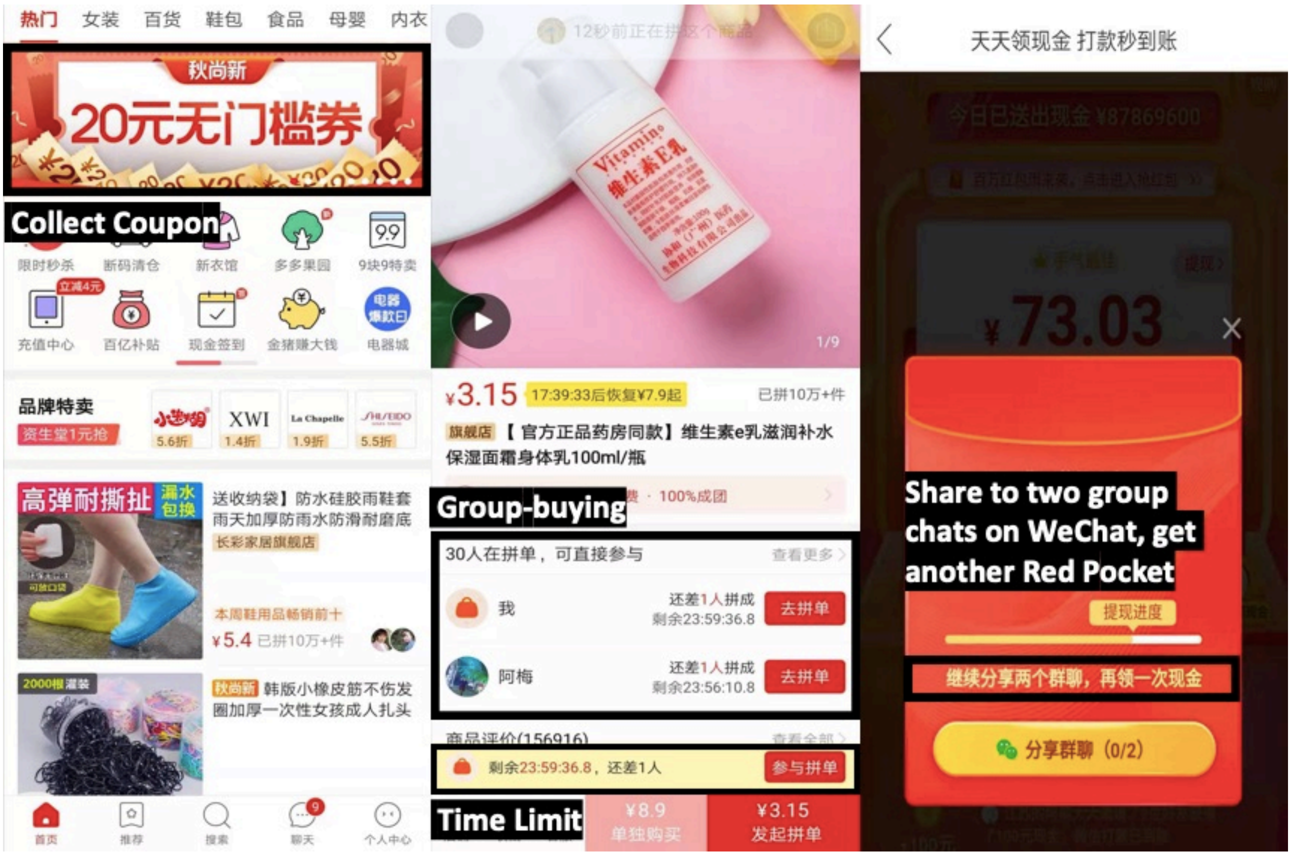
Figure 6: Pinduoduo's Shopping Model



(Source: Personal collection)

As illustrated in the Pinduoduo shopping model above, the friend's recommendations and invitations to purchase can initiate the shopping journey on the platform. Nevertheless, besides friends' invitations, users can also visit the platform directly and engage in the prize drawing activities that may encourage them to conduct a purchase. According to the CEO of Pinduoduo Zheng Huang, Pinduoduo platform has three main elements that support the consumer buying process. Firstly, if a consumer has no clear shopping goals, Pinduoduo's newsfeed-like interface displays the most popular products sold on the platform. In addition, if the user is following the Pinduoduo WeChat account, new products are recommended to the buyer based on his past purchases. Secondly, buyers are incentivized to invite as many buying partners (friends or family) as they can in order to lower the price as illustrated above in figure 6. Each product is featured with its regular and discounted price. The more users are invited to join the purchase, the lower is the individual price for every member and in some instances, it is even possible to receive the product for free. Another feature used to attract engagement, sharing and speed the consumer journey is that their offerings are often time-limited, and may last only two hours, which pushes the users to make faster buying decisions. Types of goods that are mostly consumed at Pinduoduo include food and baby products as well as women's fashion, all of which can be characterized to be consumable and non-durable goods. The profit model of Pinduoduo is similar to offline shopping malls, most of its revenue comes from shop rent, commission and advertising fees (FBI, 2018).

Figure 7: Pinduoduo's User Interface



(Source: Pinduoduo app, 2019)

Pinduoduo's Social Commerce Features

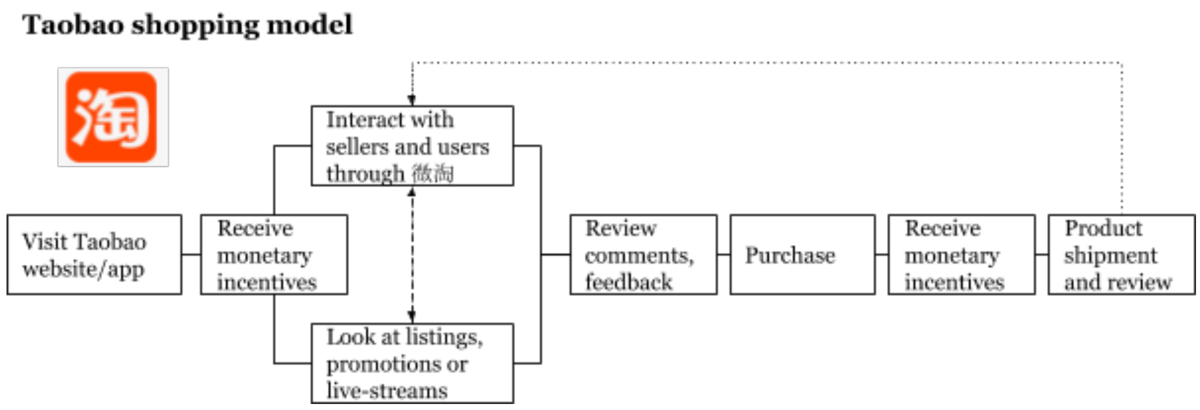
Due to its ability to penetrate closed WeChat groups and WeChat Moments, Pinduoduo became an inspiration for many other companies. As described in the previous section, to achieve that, Pinduoduo used various strategies to drive social engagement and enhance commercial activities at the same time, including group-buying and sharing, prize and product drawing, pre-purchase consulting and product review that can all be used to drive traffic and increase sales. The reward system, pre-purchase consulting and product reviewing all support the pre-purchase stage. Nevertheless, the main social features of Pinduoduo can be distinguished in group-buying and prize-drawing activities, which make Pinduoduo's business model unique. Thanks to group-buying model, users are encouraged to share content and deals with their friends, while prize-drawing enhances user engagement as only the people who win the prize, which happens after a group is formed, get a chance to buy the product.

5.1.3 Taobao

Taobao is a Chinese online shopping website, which was launched in 2003 and is owned by Alibaba. It is the world's biggest e-commerce website and the seventh most visited website according to Alexa (2019). Taobao lists hundreds of millions of products and services from millions of sellers (Blystone, 2018). At the start of Taobao's operations, the platform faced many challenges. In a low-trust society like China, online transactions were difficult to complete because buyers did not know if sellers would send out the product once they received payment, nor were sellers willing to send out items before they received payment confirmation. Taobao had the problem solved by introducing Alipay, an escrow service that would hold on to payments until the buyer had received their purchase before releasing the money to the seller. Nowadays, Alipay is the most widely used third-party online payment solution in China. It allows the users to do everything from paying for products purchased on Alibaba platforms to peer-to-peer money transfers. A distinctive feature of shopping on Taobao is the ease of communication between buyer and seller prior to the purchase through its embedded proprietary instant chat program, named Aliwangwang. It has become a habit for the Chinese consumers to communicate with the vendors through Aliwangwang to inquire about the products prior to purchasing. Buyers can ask the merchants direct questions through this software. Besides, when it comes to Taobao's business model, Taobao marketplace facilitates consumer-to-consumer retail by providing a platform for small businesses and individual entrepreneurs to open online stores that mainly cater to consumers in Chinese-speaking regions (Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan), but also abroad (Chen, 2016). The Economist (2015) referred to it as "the country's biggest online marketplace". Sellers can post goods for sale either through a fixed price sale or an auction. However, auctions make up a small percentage of all transactions. Most of the products sold are new merchandise offered at fixed prices. Taobao has a special rating system that reflects how many transactions each seller has successfully completed. At the beginning of platform's operation there was no transaction fee to conduct sales and merchants could join the site for free, which was one of the reasons behind the large base of sellers attracted to the site in a relatively short time. Today the website functions just like Google, as it lists the results for specific keywords or image searches. Merchants who pay for advertising fees can be visible at the top of results list. As an e-commerce platform, Taobao provides a platform connecting buyers with sellers, and seeks to gain profit throughout the process. The income of Taobao platform comes mainly from transaction service fees (e.g. product registration fee, transaction fee), and fees for advertising services which help sellers to stand out from a crowd of other merchants.

Taobao's profits also come from Alipay payment service. As e-commerce started becoming more and more popular in China, the emergence of online fraud halted many people from joining the online shopping scene, but thanks to introduction of Alipay Taobao regained consumers' trust.

Figure 8: Taobao Shopping Model



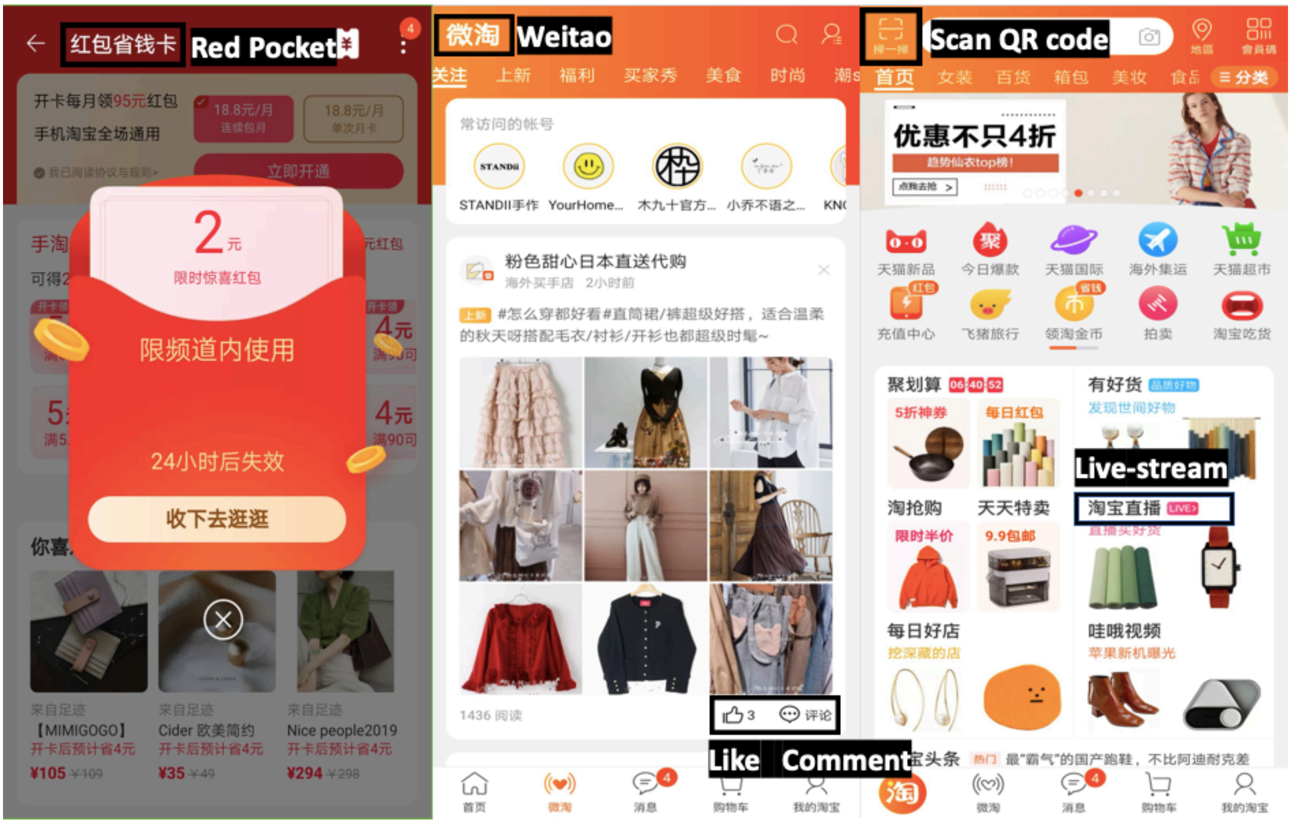
(Source: Personal collection)

Taobao's Social Commerce Features

As the largest e-commerce shopping site in the world, Taobao has various features that allow customers to combine commercial and social activities. Alibaba's CEO Yong Zhang has indicated that the company does not view Taobao as simply an e-commerce platform, as it has become a very important platform that helps the vendors attract and interact with the consumers, especially after successful implementation of the mobile app. "We have added more and more social functions to Taobao, which also increases the times that users open our app. We can see that what Taobao want, is a shopping environment where everybody can be involved in, i.e. fully make use of each social function, and attract as many buyers as possible, which is believed to be the logic of social commerce - making every single person a distributing center, to reduce the cost of content or advertisement creation" (Tencent Technology, 2016, 1).

Based on the collected secondary data three main functions that support social commerce activities on Taobao can be distinguished. First, the Red pockets and other monetary incentives play an important role in users' shopping journey on Taobao. As illustrated in the Taobao shopping model above (Figure 8), Red pockets can be given out from the shops as a voucher for next purchase in the shop to counteract part of the product's price, which increases customer stickiness. Some of the shop owners also send a red pocket in the parcel to the customers, together with a note, asking them to leave positive comments under the shop listings. Another important function on the platform that also supports pre- and post-purchase stages is Weitao (微淘). Weitao is a branch function of Taobao that is designed to a personalized mobile shopping assistant on Taobao. Within this function, users can subscribe to the shops they are interested in, follow its dynamics, and interact with the sellers. Lastly, a feature that greatly enhances commercial activities on Taobao platform is its live-streaming function that was implemented in 2016. While in the beginning Taobao mainly had KOLs and celebrities who hosted the live-streaming, later in 2017, common people started to be the majority that are active on live-streaming sales. In 2018, Taobao built a mobile application for live streaming on mobile devices, to increase users' efficiency. Nowadays, this function is an important channel that connects users with sellers and enables interactions, making it easier for consumers to get to know a product and further increase sales (Xinhuanet, 2019).

Figure 9: Taobao's User Interface



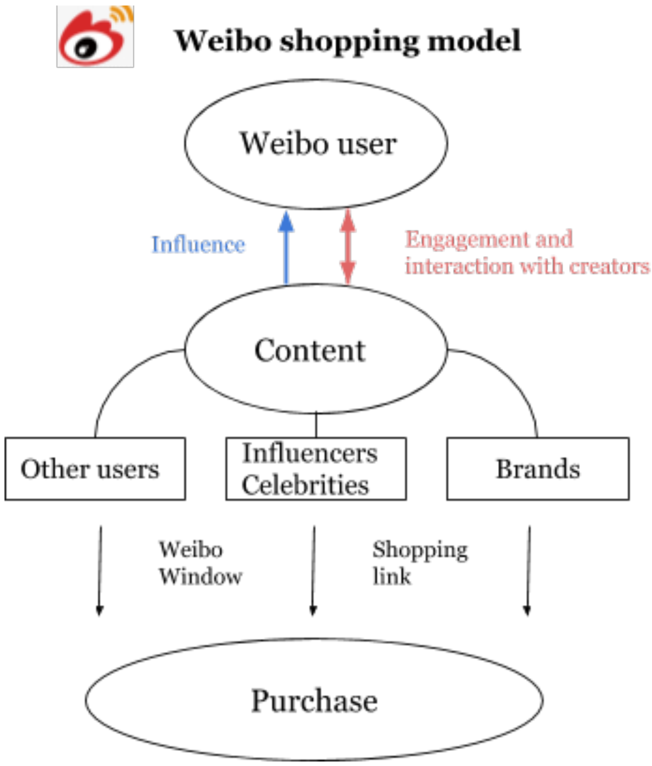
(Source: Taobao app, 2019)

5.1.4 Sina Weibo

Sina Weibo (often referred to simply as Weibo) was launched in 2009 by Sina Corporation. It is currently one of the largest information-sharing, social media and micro-blogging platforms in China that combines the features of several Western platforms, including Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube. Weibo users encompass almost 25% of Chinese population and this number is forecasted to continuously increase in the future (eMarketer, 2018). Approximately 80% of all users are under 30 years old, while the biggest user group is in between 23 to 30 years old (Shija, 2018). According to Weibo's "2018 User demographic development report", most of Weibo users come from 2nd, 3rd and 4th tier cities with growing number of users from 4th and lower tier cities compared to numbers from 2017. In addition, 93% of all users were observed to access Weibo through mobile phones (Weibo, 2019).

Despite a very competitive Chinese market, the platform remains among the most popular social media platforms in China, as it constantly improves and extends its features, learns and adapts to new trends quickly. Weibo users are able to express themselves in the form of posts, text-based content as well as photos, videos, live streams and 'Weibo stories', like its Instagram equivalent (Pan, 2017). Besides, the communication between users is facilitated through functions such as: "Like", "Comment", "Repost", "Share" and "Chat". Weibo users can also follow and subscribe to the accounts they are interested in or join chat groups to discuss particular topics. During the past few years, in order to improve platform attractiveness to users, the platform's content feed has been changed from a time-based to an algorithm-based feed, which is adapted to user's individual preferences and behaviors, and that prioritizes quality, valuable content. The engaging content on the platform is created not only thanks to Weibo's cooperation with celebrities and online influencers or media, but also thanks to the presence of many representatives from different sectors, corporations, brands, sport figures and governmental authorities. For business users, Weibo offers many options for content advertising and promotion, besides influencer marketing there is also display advertising, Fan Tunnelling (粉丝通), Fan Headlines (粉丝头条), Weibo search engine promotion and in addition specific users demographic targeting option (Brizzo, 2019). Due to growing competition in the field of social commerce, already in 2015, Weibo started to implement e-commerce features on its platform. In 2015, thanks to a cooperation with the e-commerce platforms Taobao and Jumei, Weibo launched Weibo Window (微博橱窗), an e-commerce feature. This feature allows normal users and corporate users to link their online shops to the Weibo account and supports direct sales as users can purchase the product after reading product reviews and recommendations on the platform. Moreover, in 2017 Weibo launched a cooperation with Alimama (belonging to Alibaba) and launched "Weibo content-driven marketing platform", that connects shops registered on Alimama with Weibo users with over 10 thousand followers and 100 thousand monthly page views who can earn sales commission by writing promotional posts. Taobao and Tmall are stores that are registered with Alimama, appear in the database and will be accessible to the influencers and KOLs. It was reported last year that already now, most of the revenue earned by content producers comes from e-commerce sales (Shija, 2018). Currently, Weibo plans to invest even more in developing the e-commerce features on its platform, create stronger social interaction and enrich content consumption on the platform through user-generated videos (ibid.). Although Weibo has been investing in user-generated video content already since 2015, after the emergence of other players in this industry like Douyin that occupied top positions, the short video users' growth slowed significantly, reaching only 506 million in July 2018 (Gao, 2019). Nevertheless, in Q3 last year, the proportion of Weibo's video advertising revenue to its total advertising revenue increased by two points, reaching about 27%. This shows that it is an industry with a lot of potential (ibid.). The revenue from advertising and marketing last year increased by 50% on year-over-year basis (CIW, 2019). According to Weibo's "2018 User demographic development report", during the year 2018 the amount of content posted in the form of videos and livestreams has increased. Compared to numbers from 2017, Weibo's platform observed increased engagement and interaction of users with celebrities through commenting and sharing functions (Weibo, 2019).

Figure 10: Weibo Shopping Model

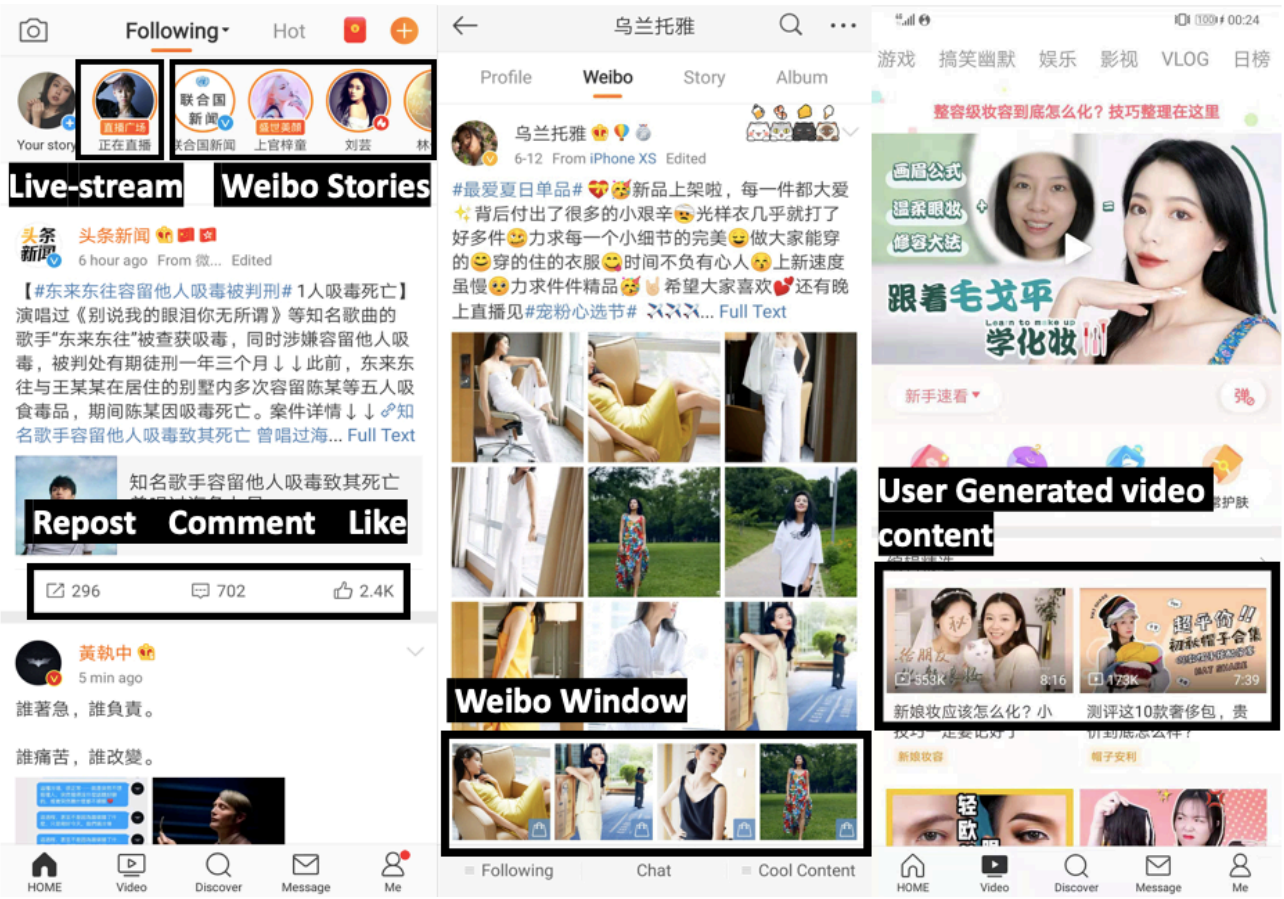


(Source: Personal collection)

Weibo's Social Commerce Features

Weibo was originally a social networking and microblogging platform that has implemented features that enable users, consumers, brands and influencers to participate in the exchange-related activities which reflect the definition of social commerce guiding this research. Based on the findings about the platform in the previous section, in figure 10, Weibo's shopping model has been presented to visualize potential Weibo user's journey to purchase enabled by the specific platform's features and functions. When it comes to pre-purchase stages, thanks to KOL campaigns and the possibility to follow accounts of interest and customised recommendations in the content feed, users can learn about new products and brands from various types of content, videos in Weibo stories, textual and graphical posts, but also live streams. Moreover, users can share their opinions and experiences with other users through comments and in the interest groups and communities. Consumers can also easily interact with brands and KOLs through live-streams and in the comment sections under every post. Interesting content can be also shared with one's social network on other platforms, which creates a possibility to indirectly attract other potential customers. Transactions on the Weibo platform are supported not only through the Weibo Window e-commerce feature, but also Weibo wallet that allows to make payments for any sold product within the platform. Weibo also supports post-purchase stages of the purchasing journey by providing space to share post-purchase experiences with one's social network, but also other users in the interest groups and communities (Wan, 2019).

Figure 11: Weibo's User Interface



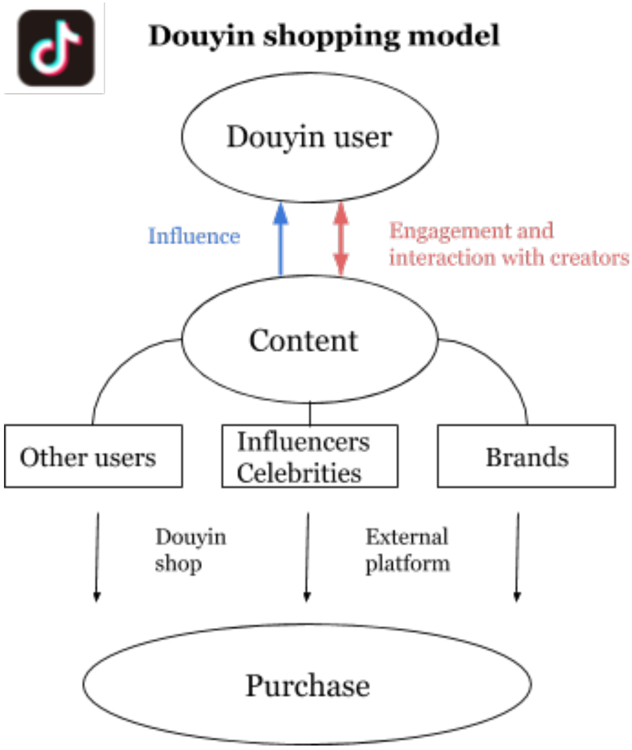
(Source: Weibo app, 2019)

5.1.5 Douyin

Douyin (known internationally as Tik Tok) was launched by news mobile application Jinri Toutiao in September 2016. After the company became experienced in news distribution category, it started to pay more attention to content creation and establishing social connections with users to increase loyalty. That is how the core of their business model switched from textual and graphical content to short video streaming. At first, Douyin was a lip-syncing app, but it quickly changed into short video and music video platform with entertaining, user-created and authentic content as well as a constantly growing number of new features including advertising and live broadcasting functions. Thanks to Douyin's partnership with big music labels like Warner Music or Sony, most licensed music pieces can be used in the 15-second-long videos uploaded on Douyin by its users. Besides, the platform encourages its users to create and upload their own music. Douyin's mobile application offers numerous built-in effects to edit the videos and create more engaging content, using various effects, filters and stickers, as well as hashtags to specific topics or other users. The video viewers are able to follow their favourite content creators as well as comment, like and share the content on other social media platforms (Kantar, 2018; FBI, 2018).

Today, the app offers not only a platform for social sharing, entertainment and easy communication between content creators, including consumers, brands and KOLs, but also enables efficient in-app purchases. Lately, the platform was increasing its efforts to expand the e-commerce functionalities in order to support brands and retailers. Nowadays, every user with more than ten videos can create his own Douyin shop and either conduct transactions within the shop without leaving the platform or link product listings from Alibaba e-commerce platforms, such as Taobao or Tmall. The shopping cart logo can be easily found on Douyin's user interface while swiping through the content. Currently it is also possible to add links to the product listings directly within videos, which can facilitate monetization and help in capitalizing the traffic. In the fast growing and competitive online commerce landscape in China, Douyin offers a new way for businesses to market and sell their products. The Douyin app is supported by algorithms and machine learning, which together with a large consumer database, enable to offer every user different recommended content based on the individual profile, preferences and viewing habits. This model subverts the way consumers get access to content and enables to uncover previously undefined needs. Instead of consumers being actively involved in the search for content, content is being recommended to them. Moreover, unlike other social media platforms like Weibo or WeChat, where large amounts of traffic are dedicated to the content produced by KOLs, thanks to algorithm transmission, Douyin videos can quickly gain significant exposure in no time. Another distinctive characteristic of this platform is that since most of the videos are restricted to 15 seconds and Douyin has an easy 'swipe' interface, users has been found to be more accepting of advertisements or content they are not particularly interested in (Graziani, 2018a). Similarly, to Weibo platform, Douyin users are also driven toward purchase through content created by other users, brands, Wanghongs or celebrities as it is illustrated below.

Figure 12: Douyin Shopping Model

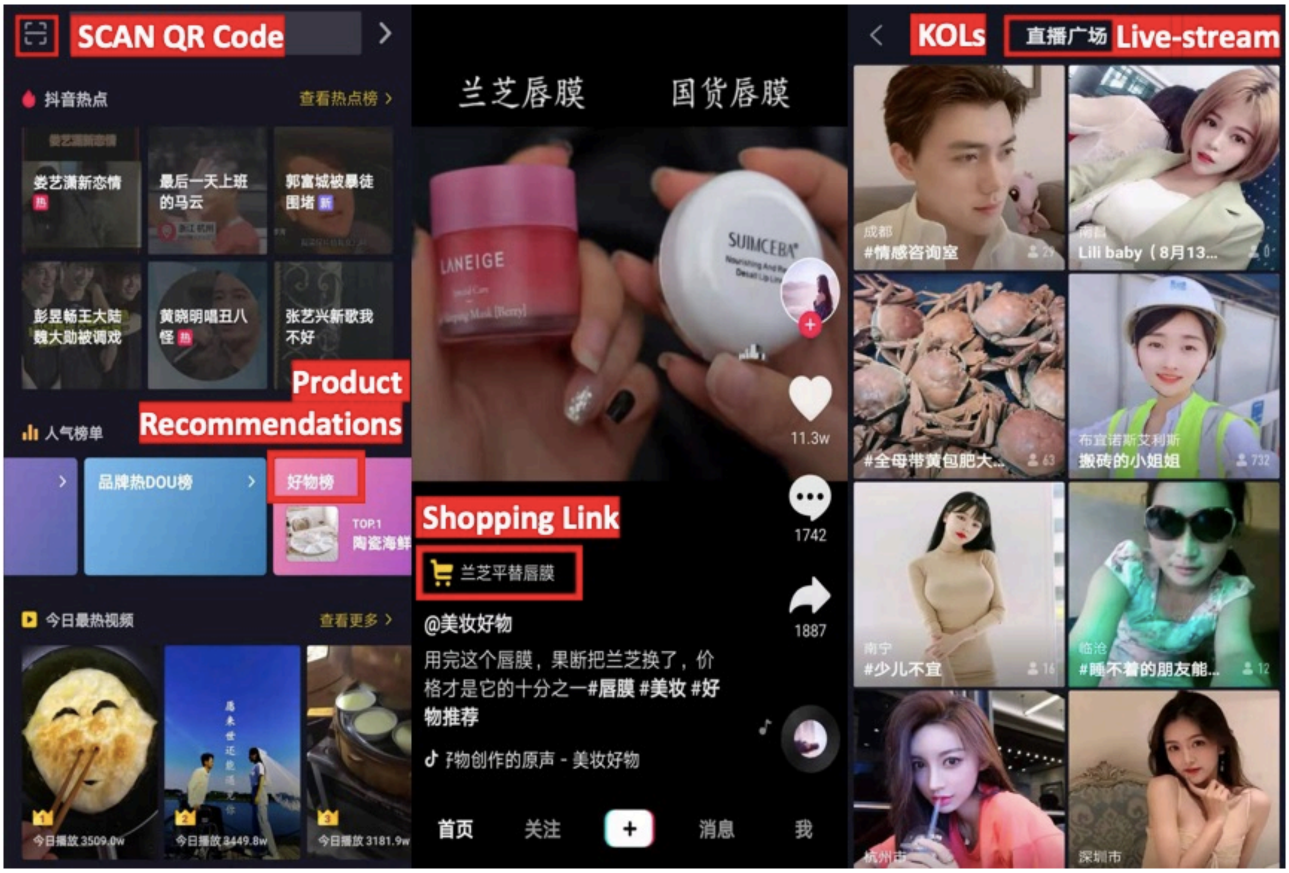


(Source: Personal collection)

In terms of user distribution and market share, despite being a relatively new platform on the Chinese market, the mother company of Douyin, ByteDance, rapidly gained popularity and attracted the attention of China's social media landscape observers all around the world. Due to its impressive success represented by a significant number of followers collected in a relatively short time, nowadays, ByteDance is often set up together with Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent and Sina as one of the social networking giants in China. Moreover, its success serves as inspiration for competitors, who try to copy their most effective features. According to UPLab Report, only within one year, Douyin's daily active users grew from 30 million to over 250 million (Huang & Ouwehand, 2019). In addition, the number of followers that consist mainly of young adults from first tier cities below 30 years old is still growing in fast pace (FBI, 2018; Huang and Ouwehand, 2019). The latest statistics published in January this year in Douyin Official Report 2018 indicate that the app's monthly active users already exceed 500 million (Douyin, 2019). What's more, the number of monthly active and daily active users increased by almost 25% within only two months counting since October to December 2018 (Liu, 2019).

When it comes to brand promotion and advertising on Douyin, besides paid display advertisements in the video feed and splash advertisement when opening the app, brands can also run promotions through KOL campaigns and in addition, with a 30% commission fee, increase the visibility of the product (Chen, 2018a). Moreover, the new feature 'Dou place' allows to target a specific audience and obtain an estimated number of clicks and engagement, as verified official accounts can be placed on top of the feed for selected keywords. Thanks to official profiles for businesses, it is possible to upload longer videos and link to the company website. Diverse features enabling better user and brand experience as well as Douyin's cooperation with big Chinese brands has been a big part of the platform's success. Among all, Douyin collaborated with China Mobile and CCTV to expand its user base. Douyin users can purchase an internet package with unlimited access to Douyin app. On the other hand, during the campaign with CCTV Chinese New Year Gala, that attracts over billion of viewers, Douyin gave away a total of 500 million RMB (around $73.8 million USD) to its users in the form of red pockets 红包 (Kantar, 2018; FBI, 2018).

Figure 13: Douyin's User Interface



(Source: Douyin app, 2019)

Douyin's Social Commerce Features

Douyin's business model is mainly based on entertaining user generated content and collaborations with brands and KOLs. Yet, as illustrated in the Douyin shopping model (figure 12), the content is a crucial driver of commercial activities on the platform. The sellers mainly use Douyin's video function, which can vividly show a products' usage, and allow the audiences to learn. These activities are mainly supported by three elements, shopping links and built-in shops and shopping carts. The shopping links are localized within videos and livestreams to Douyin shop or other e-commerce platforms were a purchase can be finalized. Besides, the shopping cart feature enables users to save desired products and finalize the purchase after getting familiar with the content.

5.1.6 Xiaohongshu

Xiaohongshu was founded by Miranda Qu and Charlwin Mao and launched in the end of 2013. Initially, the founders wanted to create a platform that would teach people how to shop overseas. The platform has started as a virtual community for users to share shopping experience, product reviews and to interact with others. With time goes by, the platform implemented its own marketplace to allow users not only to discuss about products, but also buy them from a reliable source as Xiaohongshu is cooperating with domestic and foreign brands. To provide a seamless purchasing process, Xiaohongshu also partners with WeChat Pay and Alipay to provide the payment service as well as the logistics service providers. According to GVV managing partner Hans Tung, Xiaohongshu is a pioneer in combining content, community and commerce, which is believed to be a key to success in online commerce market today (Zhang & Tung, 2018; Chen, 2018b). Xiaohongshu offers large number of high-quality UGC (user-generated content), including user's generated product reviews, tutorials and lifestyle hacks in form of notes. Notes can contain up to 1000 characters, nine images and one video. These notes are created not only by common users, but also by KOLs, traditional celebrities and shared only to a relevant audience that is interested in the type of content created. Xiaohongshu is a pioneer utilizing so called "guided purchase" (导购) (GGV, 2018). The platform uses recommendation algorithm to ensure that users are only offered the content they are willing to see, find helpful or useful. Unlike other platforms, there is no sharing functions within the platforms in order to ensure quality and relevance of content that is recommended. Until recently, the platform also did not make use of display advertising for the same reasons. However, in 2019, Xiaohongshu established a special set of advertising R&D teams to build an advertisement division. Still, the platform is very focused on transparency and quality. For example, an auditing system and a post-maintenance management system for advertising are built by a specialized technical team. The advertising functions are only available for Xiaohongshu's own brand "REDelight" (有光) (Appendix 9). Moreover, Xiaohongshu have a dedicated review team in the sharing community section to review the content posted by every user. In addition, users can also clearly see which posts are sponsored (Zheng, 2019).

With the help of big data analysis, Xiaohongshu sees which products users search for more. According to the interview we conducted with a Xiaohongshu employee, the most searched products are analysed in the marketing department, which then works on establishing a cooperation with relevant brands to fit the demands of users (Appendix 9). Products sold on Xiaohongshu can be divided into two main categories. One is imported products from for instance big-name brands of skin care products and health care products that the platform cooperates with. The other is the range of products under Xiaohongshu's own brand REDelight (Appendix 9). Because the most popular content and product categories include fashion and beauty, currently, the majority of Xiaohongshu users consist mainly of females between the ages 20 and 40 (Chen, 2018b). Nevertheless, the Xiaohongshu employee revealed that the platform is looking into the establishment of a separate men's division, which would offer topics and content targeting male users, such as sports and photography (Appendix 9).

Throughout the years, Xiaohongshu accumulated a large female user base with significant amount of consumption data. As a result, the platform created a closed shopping circle:

Figure 14: Xiaohongshu's Shopping Circle

(Source: adapted from Tingyi Chen, 2018b)

The whole process of consumers interacting with Xiaohongshu can be described in three stages, which also reflect the shopping circle above: “zhongcao” (种草) or “planting weeds”, “zhangcao” (长草) or “growing weeds” and “bacao” (拔草) or “pulling weeds”. The first stage “zhongcao” represents the “awareness” in the AIDA marketing model. At this stage, notes created by other users and KOLs play the most important role. Here, influencers cultivate their followers by creating content that attracts a user’s attention. The second stage of growing weeds reflects the interest and desire of the AIDA model. Consumers at this stage interact with the app and other users, engage with the content recommended by Xiaohongshu’s algorithm. Finally, a weed can be “pulled”, and at this stage the consumer either buys the product or resigns from the purchase (Zhang, 2017).

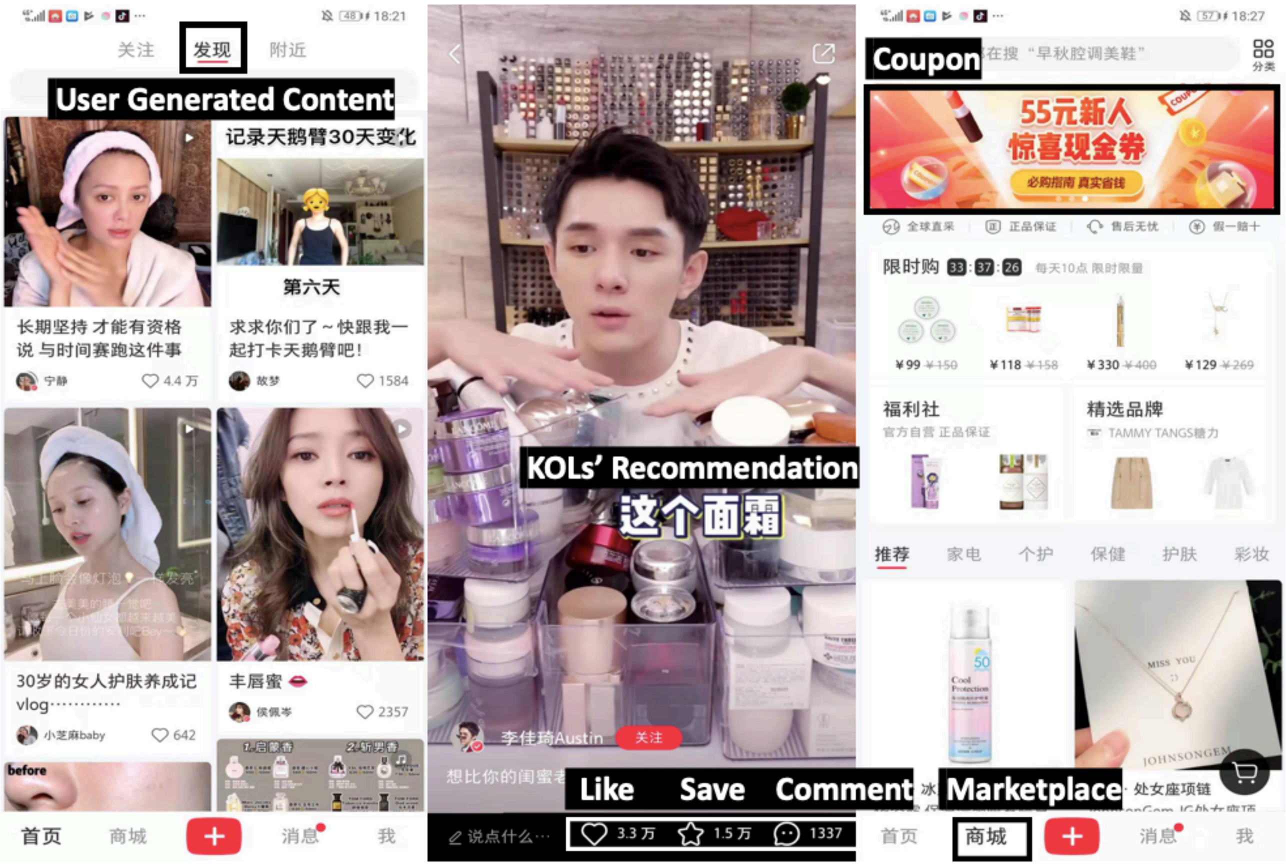
Besides using big data and algorithms to create engaging content at the “zhongcao” stage, Xiaohongshu also cooperates with popular users on the platform, such users are equivalent to KOLs. Xiaohongshu’s own brand uses brand ambassadors to endorse their products, while third party brands can cooperate with a large KOL base active on the platform (Appendix 9). KOLs and celebrities active on the platform are important part of Xiaohongshu’s success. They are behind the platform’s effectiveness to drive brand recognition and promotions. On Xiaohongshu KOLs fall into three categories. First, there are traditional celebrities who endorse brands. In the second category there are native Xiaohongshu KOLs who built their status and recognition on the platform. Lastly, there are also KOLs invited by Xiaohongshu from other communities. They all create engaging content that drive users to switch to the second stage of “growing weeds” and later “pulling weeds” (Gao, 2018).

Xiaohongshu’s unique positioning as a platform with authentic, community-focused content that brings value through WOM and influencers, makes it more of a social than commercial platform. According to the individual interview with employee of Xiaohongshu, for the last few years the slogan of the platforms was constantly changing from “Good things around the world” and “Mark your life” to “The other side of life of celebrities”. This reflects that Xiaohongshu is still at the development stage and the platform’s strategy for the future is not clear. Currently, the main purpose of the platform is to share and engage users into social interactions, while the commercial activities are just an addition (Appendix 9).

Xiaohongshu's Social Commerce Features

Xiaohongshu has made a successful transition from a recommendation app to a shopping platform (Sentance, 2018b). Thanks to the platform's management of user-generated content, Xiaohongshu has gained a level of authenticity and trustworthiness. Besides that, it allows posting of anonymous reviews, there are also many KOLs and sales campaigns or promotions organized to help brands generate sales. In January 2019, a "brand partner platform" was launched that connects brands directly to the relevant Xiaohongshu influencers to arrange sponsored posts, endorsements or product reviews. The platform also provides a function to insert direct shopping links to the Xiaohongshu marketplace into the notes, to enhance the "pulling weeds" (拔草) stage (Sentance, 2018b). The commercial activities may be also expected to increase through the platform, as recently Xiaohongshu started developing its own WeChat mini-program social marketplace Xiaohongdian (Li, 2019).

Figure 15: Xiaohongshu's User Interface



(Source: Xiaohongshu app, 2019)

5.2. Analysis of Platforms

5.2.1 Platform Performance Assessment

The framework to assess social commerce platforms in China developed by Han and Trimi (2017) has been adopted to analyze the platforms we selected. According to the principles of this framework, a platform is defined as "the linkage component, through which Customer and Merchant communicate, share, and collaborate through four entities: Social-related exchange activities, Information, Management and Technology" (ibid, 52). Due to the specific Chinese context that is the subject of this study and the bigger scope of social commerce features available in China, the characteristics of the four components have been modified so that they can be applied to the platforms studied in this paper. For the features assigned to more than one component, the one that is most representative has been chosen. Moreover, some features that have very similar functions have been grouped into categories. The visualization of the adapted framework can be found in the Appendix 11.

The four components of the framework, namely social-related exchange activities, information, technology and management, as well as their associated features will be introduced below. This section will also explain the framework assessment process and present its outcomes, while the types of platforms which can be diverted from the collected secondary data and the framework will be presented in the next section.

Social-Related Exchange Activities

The first component of social-related exchange activities consists of seven elements that are all based on relationships and interactions with one's social network and other users. They are designed to support customers' buying decisions, create awareness, and also help in post-purchase stages and experience sharing. First, interest groups and communities allow the users to find others who are interested in the same topic or products and discuss and interact together. Second, save function allows the users to keep the content for later purchase or review. Third, sharing features let the users share content on other platforms or with friends, also including QR codes and tagging other users in the post or comment. Next, group-buying feature enables users to conduct group purchases with friends and other users, while the feedback function allows the users to give feedback about content or purchase, including commenting on the product page, posting reviews and ratings as well as pressing the “like” button. Lastly, reward functions allow the customers to receive various kinds of bargains as electronic coupons or Red Pockets (红包).

Information

The information component is the driving force in the s-commerce environment and most representative of the uniqueness of s-commerce (Shadkam & O’Hara, 2013; Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). Information supports pre-purchase stages, helps to create brand awareness and to conduct product evaluation at the same time. For this component, five features have been identified. First of all, text, photo, video and live stream are all different forms of information transit. However, because each of the analyzed platforms provides textual and graphical content, these two features have been grouped together. Secondly, social networking services include all kinds of social interaction activities such as direct messaging, chat rooms, posting content and sharing in social communities. Lastly, advertisements are paid services for the brands with an aim to gain customers. These include display advertising, promotional posts and SERP marketing.

Technology

The technology component enables sellers to quickly adapt to the changes in the market and observe growing trends or switching preferences and needs (Baghdadi, 2013). It supports the creation of a seamless experience along different stages of the consumer purchasing journey. This component also includes using big data about consumer behavior and interactions to customize a more personalised journey. As mentioned previously, according to Edelman and Singer (2015), there are four basic capabilities that allow to create a more consistent and personalized experience: automation, proactive personalization, contextual interaction and journey innovation. The features categorized under this platform’s component have been organized in line with these four capabilities. Automation is enabled through four features: QR codes, built-in shops, in-app communication and integrated payment systems. QR codes may be used to display text to the user, to add a friend, to connect to a wireless network or to compose an email or text message. A built-in shop is a shop within a platform that allows the consumers to make quick purchases. In-app communication are communication tools within an app that allow convenient conversations. Integrated payment system include WeChat pay, Alipay etc. Proactive personalization as well as contextual interaction is possible thanks to leveraging algorithms and machine learning from big data collected on users. Algorithm and machine learning serve as the main engine for pushing personalized content to the users and recommending next steps, therefore, these are also one of the features in this component. Lastly, the mobile application allows the user to access the platform through mobile devices, which is in line with Chinese consumers online behaviour trends since they tend to access the internet through their mobile phones (McCarthy, 2018). This feature reflects the last category, namely journey innovation.

Management

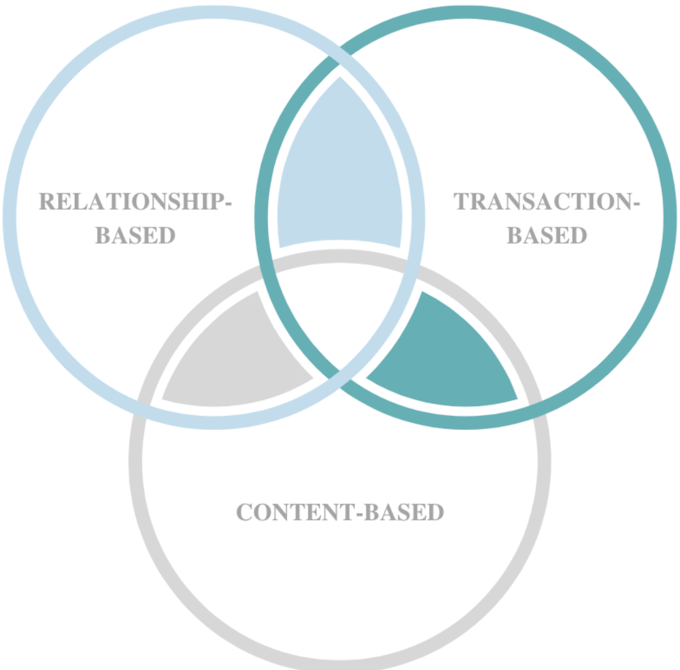
Management components are the strategies used by platform to combine different channels for information collection, selling and post-purchase services, like customer support and logistics. They are designed to enhance the overall customer experience, from pre-purchase, transaction to post-purchase. Seamless connection means the users can easily switch to other platforms to share, comment, purchase or post reviews. Cooperation with brands meaning the platform signed contracts with certain brands and can sell their products with authorization. Cooperation with influencers means the platforms collaborate with certain KOLs to organize promotional campaigns. Post-purchase support provides the customers with services such as return, refund or change after the purchase. Lastly, secure logistics allow the customers to receive what they buy safely and on time.

Based on the assessment of the four components of the framework above and their associated features, the distinguished features were categorized into the ones that: (1) support building brand awareness activities, content creation, promotion and advertising like UGC; (2) support relationship-building and social interactions like sharing functions and online communities; and (3) support strictly the transaction and purchase process like integrated payment (Appendix 11).

5.2.2. Types of Social Commerce Platforms and Their Dynamics

Based on findings from secondary data collected on the six platforms studied in this paper and the analysis of the framework described in the previous section, three basic types of platforms have been distinguished; relationship-based, transaction-based and content-based platforms.

Figure 16: Types of SC Platforms

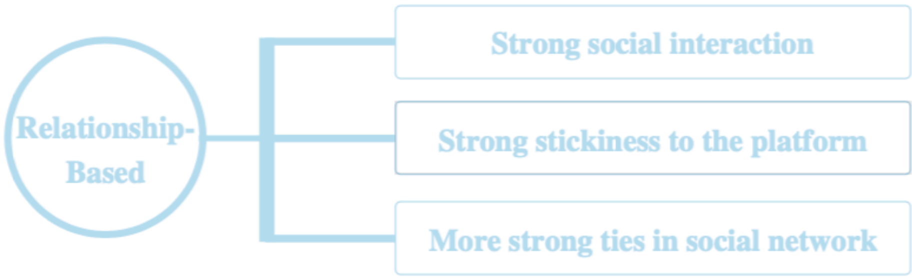


(Source: personal collection)

Before introducing each of the types, it should be noted that there are platforms that could not be assigned to only one type. The underlying reasoning behind this complexity will be elaborated on later in this paper, as it is not only related to the analysis of the features distinguished in the framework, but also associated with the platform's usage behaviour reported by our interviewed consumers. First of all, in this section, different types of platforms will be explained including their main characteristics and functions, supported by the data collected about the platforms that was presented previously. Secondly, explanation of complexity in platform's type categorization will be presented, followed by a discussion of different orientations in individual platform's development.

Relationship-based Platform

Figure 17: Characteristics of Relationship-based Platform

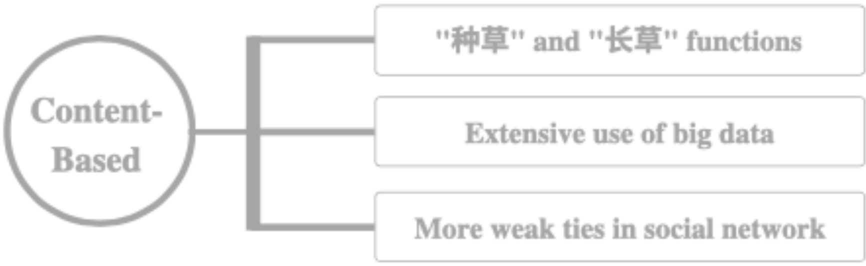


(Source: personal collection)

Relationship-based platforms are mainly serving as a platform concentrating around interpersonal relationships and social networking. Their key functions are sharing, exchanging opinions and social interactions. Relationship-based platforms usually have the characteristics of strong social interaction, strong user stickiness and strong social ties. Strong social interaction characteristic can be seen in their functionality, as suggested in WeChat section, it allows its users to build up interpersonal relationships and provide a platform for messaging. Weibo, Xiaohongshu and Pinduoduo has less focus on messaging functions, but they all have various features that support social networking, information acquisition and entertainment, which make up the social interaction characteristic. Strong user stickiness to the platform is shown in relationship-based platforms, as "Guanxi" has a central role in Chinese culture, relationship-based platforms allow their users to build up and maintain their Guanxi with other users, which is an important step in Chinese culture. Therefore, relationship-based platforms often have strong user stickiness. Comparing to the other types of platforms, relationship-based ones have more strong ties. The concept of social ties from social network theory and the notion of "Zi Ji Ren" can be used to analyze the relationships among the users, it is because of the predominant strong ties on relationship-based platforms including Zi Ji Ren such as friends and family or people with whom one shares similar values and beliefs. It is also part of the reason that the user's willingness to stick with the platform is strong. On WeChat, Weibo, Xiaohongshu and Pinduoduo, the users usually have strong ties compared to on other platforms, like family, close friends and favoured KOLs, hence they are categorized into relationship-based platforms.

Content-based Platform

Figure 18: Characteristics of Content-based Platform

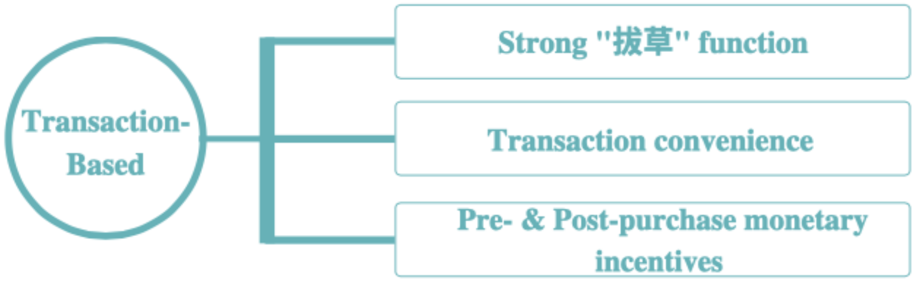


(Source: personal collection)

Content-based platforms are the ones that mainly use diverse types of content to attract traffic. These contents include common user-generated, influencer-generated or celebrity-generated written articles, tutorial videos, live-streams and infographics. The characteristics of content-based platforms are strong "种草 (planting weeds)" (building-up awareness) and "长草 (growing weeds)" (growing interests) functions, extensive use of big-data for customized content, and more weak ties compared to relationship-based platforms. Strong "种草 (planting weeds)" and "长草 (growing weeds)" function are seen in that the content-based platforms support sharing of various forms content to targeted audiences with the goal of generating more leads, who previously did know so much about a product or brand, accessing the content makes them aware of the product or brand. Big data is used extensively as these platforms rely on the collected big data on users' behaviors and preferences in order to optimize and personalize the content being recommended to individual users, which in turn enhances traffic and engagement. The user relationships on this type of platform constitute more of weak ties that provide information support (Kramer, 2014) and which reach beyond immediate friends and family (Hammond & Glenn, 2004). WOM play an important role on these platforms similarly to relationship-based platforms as a form of social commerce construct that create information through user-generated recommendations and reviews (Hajli et al., 2014). The rich content and use of big data and recommendation algorithms support "种草 (planting weeds)"and "长草(growing weeds)" functions.

Transaction-based Platforms

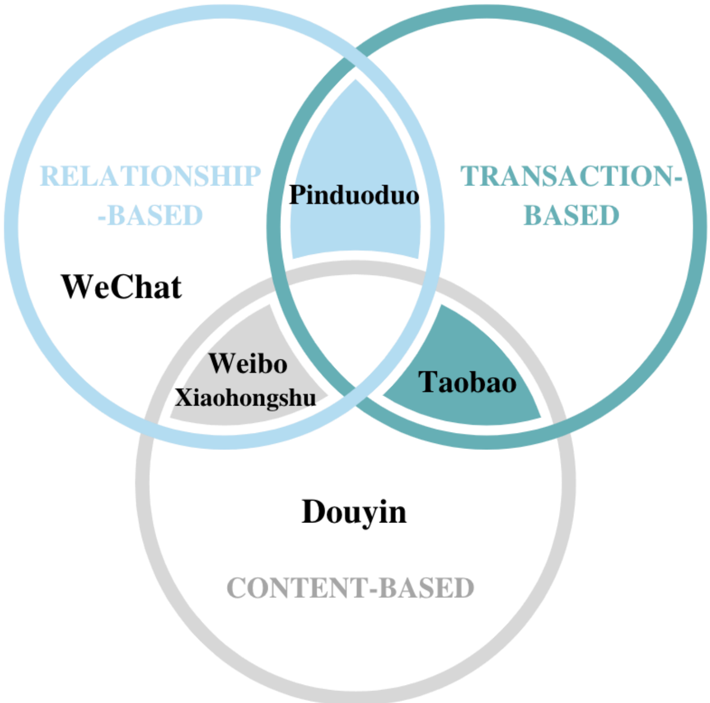
Figure 19: Characteristics of Transaction-based Platform



(Source: personal collection)

The last type, transaction-based platforms have features concentrated on the transaction and extensive merchandize which allow consumers to directly search and buy. They have the characteristics of "拔草 (pulling weeds)" (action on the interest towards a product), transaction convenience and provide pre- and post-purchase monetary incentives for their users. "拔草 (pulling weeds)" is seen in that on the transaction-based platforms they usually have high product variety, that allow the users to find the products their desire. Not only there is transaction convenience thanks to technology used to improve operational performance and to offer convenient services including payment, but also pre- and post-purchase monetary incentives which are being used to support and strengthen the "拔草(pulling weeds)" function on the platform. Pre- and post-monetary incentives like electronic coupons, red pockets and time-limited discounts add value to the transaction and make users stick to the platform instead of choosing another one to complete the purchase.

Figure 20: Categorization of Platforms



(Source: personal collection)

As discussed before in the background section, due to the high competitiveness of the Chinese market, it is not a secret that all platforms constantly try to improve their features to adapt to the newest trends and emerging demands of the consumers. They change and develop dynamically to maintain and expand their market shares and stay competitive in comparison to other players. The platform framework in the appendix shows that many of the features are shared by all the platforms today. Looking at the Venn diagram above and considering the platform features from the framework, all platforms appear to move toward the center in an effort to enable all the functions that the users may demand in order to keep them from switching to the competitor. Yet, not all features implemented by the platforms and mentioned in the framework assessment are actively used by the consumers themselves. For instance, according to our framework (Appendix 11), Taobao has all of the features associated with the social commerce, yet it was not placed in the centre of the Venn diagram. This is because it started as an e-commerce platform and it is still mainly used by consumers as such. The analysis reveals that there is a clear difference between where the platform is "based" meaning in which aspects platform is specializing in and which functions are reportedly the most favoured versus where the platform is "oriented". The future orientation of the platform and their development trail can be seen from all the features that are being implemented. While some platforms start at a different base, they appear to strive to come to the “golden middle” of social commerce.

Weibo, WeChat Pinduoduo and Xiaohongshu can be regarded as relationship-based platforms. However, only WeChat is purely relationship-based type, while the others are somewhere in between the circles. The difference between WeChat and Weibo are that in Weibo, the social tie among the users are slightly weaker, but the influences by KOLs are strong; whereas in WeChat, the influences among the users are not as strong as in Weibo, but the social ties are strong. These characteristics of the two platforms therefore lead to different ways of selling. The difference is that on WeChat, trust is easier to build as most of the sellers and their buyers knew each other before the purchase, but on Weibo, the sellers need long-term trust building. That is why WeChat is a pure relationship-based platform, while Weibo is both a relationship- and content-based platform. Pinduoduo’s model is based on group-buying, which is achieved thanks to users’ relationships and sharing within one’s social networks. Since the user interface allow the users to make a purchase easily, it is at the same time grouped into transaction-based platform. Xiaohongshu’s relationship-based features are shown in the relationships between the users and influencers - since Xiaohongshu’s popularity boomed after many Chinese celebrities opened account on the platform to conduct influencer marketing, it has now become a significant place for brands, especially in travel, luxury and beauty categories, as a platform for engagement and interaction with customers. Posts on Xiaohongshu by Wanghongs have extremely strong “种草 (planting weeds)” and “长草 (growing weeds)” functions, therefore this platform is also one of the content-based platforms. For Douyin, the user-generated entertaining video content is the basis of the platform model. When it comes to Taobao, the core of it is the personalized content and customized user journey, plus the abundant commodity listings that provide customers with various choices, the product details section in each listing on Taobao is informative, therefore it is content-based. With the usage of Alipay, it allows its users to have seamless payment method, quick and secure, therefore it is also transaction-based platform. However, looking at the content-based platforms, Douyin and Xiaohongshu are relatively new compared to Taobao and Weibo, and they start as content providers - one with video entertaining content, one with product reviews. These two applications got so popular in a short time, which could indicate that good content can be an efficient driver of traffic.

In the literature review of this paper, we have stated that some Chinese scholars divided China’s social commerce into three main types. However, our way of dividing platforms is partly different from theirs. As stated previously, according to Sun and Zhang (2017), one of the types was developed by big social media platforms with large user base. These kinds of platforms usually develop effective user flow, and the demand is created passively through interaction between people or informative posts. Relationship-based platforms such as WeChat and Weibo apply the suggested types, and they usually have huge user flow and users tend to be influenced by their friends or people they follow. Based on their division of types, Douyin is also suitable to be placed in this type as “e-commerce model developed by massive comprehensive social platforms”, since Douyin serves as a social platform while having additional e-commerce functions. However, in our analysis, instead of relationship-based platforms, Douyin is divided into content-based ones, because rather than building up relationship among users and sellers/influencers/content creators, it serves more as entertainment and a platform for video content. Like Douyin, Xiaohongshu is also classified into content-based platforms and relationship-based platforms, while if we classify it according to previous scholars’ types, it would be considered a “emerging social shopping site”, which is good at keeping up with the latest fashion trends to attract a large number of users in short time. We categorize Xiaohongshu as a content-based platform type because providing reviews is the main usage of it, and we consider reviews as content. The third type discussed by scholars is “social features established by e-commerce platforms”. Pinduoduo and Taobao could be classified into this group. Further, Pinduoduo and Taobao can be regarded as transaction-based platforms, since “selling” is the most prominent feature of them. They are more inclined to e-commerce platforms, which are transaction-based. The most differences are seen on newly developed platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu, since they are adopting unique business strategies rather than copying others, and there has not been any adequate study on them compared to the other platforms.

5.3 Consumers: Focus Groups and Individual Interviews

In section 5.2, we will present our findings resulting from focus group and individual interviews. We conducted the focus group and in-depth interviews based on our interview guide, which is demonstrated in the methodology part. In terms of focus groups, we pose a series of questions which are intended to gain insight about the way the group views the platforms as well as the mechanisms and the role of social interactions. The questions posed to the groups do not lead the group members to provide desired responses, but rather honest and insightful responses. Instead of sticking to the prepared questions, we also asked follow-up questions according to the answers by the interviewees.

Our interviewees answered our interview questions with their personal experiences as consumers. The aim of this section is to summarize the main ideas, concepts and thoughts from the participants arisen in the focus group and in-depth interviews. After coding the interview transcripts, the following themes have arisen: Social commerce concept, platforms, influencers, advertisements, and engagement. In this chapter, each theme will first be presented, followed by an analysis of the customer decision journey in social commerce and its complexities and influences.

5.3.1 Social Commerce Concept

One of the first questions discussed in the focus interviews and in the follow-up individual interviews discussed the understanding of social commerce. Most of the respondents in the focus group interviews tended to point out their associations regarding specific platforms, which they identify with social commerce, including Xiaohongshu, WeChat, Douyin and Taobao. In one focus group, a participant pointed out that social commerce platform has “Social interaction attributes”, and in the following discussion participants compared Xiaohongshu platform with Taobao platform. While Xiaohongshu was raised frequently during the discussions as an example of a social commerce platform, there were differing opinions raised regarding Taobao, which was more frequently portrayed as simply an e-commerce platform. Nevertheless, one respondent noticed that Taobao has a comment section where users can discuss and exchange opinions:

“In my opinion, the comment section on Taobao has social interaction attributes, because it will impact the future buyer and users can also discuss with each other in this comment space” (No.2.3)

While another participant claimed that in comparison to Xiaohongshu, social interaction attributes on Taobao are weaker:

“On social interaction platform like Xiaohongshu, it is possible that users will meet offline and become good friends, that is social interaction. That is why social interaction attributes on Taobao are weaker than on 小红书, but it cannot be said that Taobao has no social interaction attributes” (No.2.6)

Other frequent associations with social commerce were “communication” and “experience sharing”, which are closely related to “social interaction attributes”. One of the respondents associated the social aspect of social commerce with close friends or their extended friend circle. Interestingly, in a follow-up individual interview, a participant identified social commerce differently than respondents in the focus group, highlighting the commercial aspect of social commerce, but also stressing social media platform as the ground where social commerce occurs:

"Weishang (微商), that is spread through social media, commercial activities on social media platforms" (Yuexi Li individual Interviewee)

In the focus group discussions regarding the concept of social commerce, participants raised various aspects of this phenomenon, including social interaction elements like comments and reviews as well as communication possibility with other users. Other associations involved group-buying and specific platforms ranging from social media platforms with commercial elements to e-commerce platforms with social commerce elements. Definitely the most frequently stressed associations were pointing towards social interaction elements, which pure e-commerce platforms do not possess or at least to a much weaker degree. This aspect appeared to be the most valuable for most of the participants, which revealed that social media elements are creating a platform for communication and interaction that is important for consumers in order to collect and share shopping information (Casaló et al., 2013). As one participant mentioned above, on platforms like Xiaohongshu it might be also important for the purpose of social networking and building friendships (Li & Du, 2017). In addition, the single associations with friends circle and '微商' shows the perception of social commerce as a phenomenon occurring among one's social network. Such an understanding of social commerce related to one's friends circle and social interaction reflects the opinion on this phenomenon of one of the market experts that was interviewed in this study. The CEO of NihaoCPH Rasmus Gregersen mentioned that social commerce is not a new concept: "Chinese people have more trust in their friends, (so it is) simply another way of putting on social selling, it is not new, it has always been around offline (...) even if you go to the store, you will ask your friends or find reviews online" (Appendix 6).

5.3.2 Determinants of the Choice of Platforms

Credibility

As has already been mentioned in the literature review, scholars indicate that the Chinese e-commerce market is growing at an unprecedented pace, while facing many challenges, among which distrust is one the biggest (Zhang, Bian & Zhu, 2013). The CEO from Danish content marketing and social selling company BingBang also stressed this: “Trust is a huge issue, it is on the top of mind all the time” (Appendix 7). Not surprisingly, credibility was the most commonly mentioned issue during the whole interviewing process. The significant part of participants discussion in the focus groups resolved around the topic of credibility, especially concentrated on three aspects:

1. Counterfeits
2. Product variety and price
3. Convenience and quality of pre- & post-purchase services

The answers of the majority of participants revealed that they are very sensitive towards counterfeits sold on a platform, they expressed with certainty that they will not make purchases through such platforms:

“I think I am a very conservative consumer; it will be super hard for me to trust the platform if I encounter counterfeit, even only once” (No.2.3)

“I will stop using the platform if counterfeit appears” (No.2.1)

Besides, high possibility of buying counterfeits and fake products was named to be a reason for purchasing only cheap products online. *(No.1.4*) Consumers participating in the focus groups expressed suspicion towards the authenticity of the products sold online, especially for the more expensive products like computers, cameras and cosmetics. From the responses, it is evident that most participants are very cautious and choose to buy products with relatively low value online but prefer to purchase more valuable products offline to avoid the potential loss. This confirms the observation made by Frasquet et al. (2015) that depending on the type of product, different channels might be chosen for the purchase.

The consumers’ answers also show that it is hard for them to trust one platform, and if the trust is built, it can be very easily broken down again. Our interviewee expressed the same attitude as previous scholars analyzed: in China, the default is “distrust”, and the Chinese consumers will only trust a platform if it is proven worthy (De Cremer, 2015). Whereas, some of the focus group participants expressed increased trust towards platform like Xiaohongshu that was often brought up as an example of a social commerce platform. The participant has compared it with Taobao, where cheaper products are usually purchased:

"I haven't bought anything on Xiaohongshu before, but I think Xiaohongshu is overall reliable. I usually make purchases on Taobao, but only inexpensive items such as living supplies and cheap clothes, and never cosmetic products. When it comes to food, normally I don't buy on taobao" (No.2.6)

"Because I have inexplicable trust for Xiaohongshu, and so far, I haven't bought any fake products yet" (No.2.1)

Several answers from the focus groups have indicated that Taobao is more likely to have counterfeit or low-quality products because it is a C2C platform. Taobao sellers were claimed to make use of the names of big brands to attract traffic without considering the legal consequences. Several participants mentioned Tmall to be more trustworthy than Taobao because the product quality on this platform is guaranteed, which leaves a better impression on the consumers and appears more attractive as a channel for buying. The opinions voiced by the majority of the respondents suggested that quality control is important when they are considering a platform. When speaking of Tmall Chaoshi (天猫超市), one respondent indicated that she does not need to do any research or look at others' reviews before buying, she just visits the web shop and looks for the good she needs because of trust in "platform's branding" and reputation:

"normally when the seller sells on Tmall Chaoshi, there is a quality verification, all kinds of foods have gone through the quality control, so I assume there shouldn't be any problem buying there. And normally the large platforms don't sell 'unbranded' products. Hence, the standard quality can be achieved. Also, according to their platform branding, fake products are less likely to appear than on Pinduoduo." (No.1.2)

To sum up, it is evident that a platform's reputation, experiences of others, but also buyer's personal experience with the platform are important factors that impact consumers' choice of platform. Pinduoduo and Taobao are more associated with fake, cheap, low-quality products, while Tmall and Xiaohongshu appear to be more trusted by the participants of focus groups. Consumer seems to attach more trust to platforms with verification system, quality control and in this case, as one participant highlighted, they might not even do much research before the purchase, since they trust in platform's branding and reputation. This is important when discussing the consumer purchasing journey, because it shows that a platform's implementation of right capabilities to design and optimize consumer journey as well as create credibility can in large part eliminate pre-purchase stages of the consumer journey, as the consumer moves straight to the transaction. Hence, this finding confirms the claims of Edelman and Singer (2015).

Product Variety and Price

While many participants reflected negative opinions about Taobao as an e-commerce platform with a lot of fake products of questionable quality, most respondents agreed that there are tons of sellers with all kinds of product, providing consumers with thousands of choices: "basically people can find everything on Taobao" (No.1.1). Despite its negative reputation, the Taobao platform with its large product variety seem to satisfy a wide range of consumer tastes. Moreover, besides the product choice, as mentioned in the previous section, participants also revealed to pay attention to the product's price. It was named to be an important factor when deciding which platform to purchase from:

"I think the most important factor for me when deciding which product to buy, is the price." (No.1.3)

"a lot of small brands on Taobao have been improving their product qualities. For instance, there was once I wanted to buy socks, branded ones like Nike or Adidas, their prices are normally high, but the same unbranded socks on e-commerce platforms also have high quality, so I buy a lot of them when I am in China." (No.2.4).

During the focus group interviews it became evident that there are two different motivations for consumers when making a purchase decision. Different from the customers quoted above who care most about the price, another group of people attached more importance to the brands that are available on the platforms. One of the interviewees expressed that the reason that they choose certain platforms such as Tmall or JD.com is because they have official stores of his interested brands:

"Brands choose to cooperate with the platforms or shops, and consumers tend to shop in the official shop of a brand" (No.2.4).

According to the above example statements, it appears that the consumers participating in our focus group interviews and the follow-up individual interviews can be grouped into two types:
price-oriented and brand oriented. These types are similar to the passive and active loyalists distinguished previously by McKinsey & Company (2009). Active loyalists are similar to brand-oriented consumers who will likely stick to specific brands and use flagship stores to shop, while passive loyalists are similar to price-oriented consumers as they do not stick to the brand but are likely to switch to others. Different from McKinsey's categorization, our research shows that price is sometimes the most important factor when choosing where and what to buy, hence, instead of passive loyalists, the term price-oriented was found to be more accurate. Previously, Zhu (2013) characterized Chinese consumers to be both price sensitive and brand conscious. Price is often

the determining factor for Chinese consumers when making purchase decisions, at the same time, Chinese are very brand conscious, as is shown by their fondness of luxury brands. Zhu (2013) has argued that the reason that Chinese consumers are both price-sensitive and brand-conscious is due to the Chinese culture, where social status is crucial - if a brand can signal a higher social and/or economic status, Chinese consumers would be happy to pay a premium. If it does not, they become very price sensitive. Different from Zhu's (2013) way of classification, where she indicates that Chinese are both price-sensitive and brand-conscious at the same time, our interviewees in this research showed to be either price-oriented or brand-oriented.

Nevertheless, regardless of the distinction between brand-oriented and price-oriented consumers, most of the focus group interviewees admitted checking on more than one platform, before conducting the final purchase in order to compare the price, product and purchase-related information. One participant stated: "I would use multiple channels to know a product and compare" (No.2.3).

As found earlier by (Reardon &McCorkle, 2002), multichannel journey enables a more diverse shopping experience for consumers. A consumer may be prompted to switch to different channels not only when the product or service can be found cheaper or when a wider range is offered, but also because it is more convenient to shop through a different channel (Reardon &McCorkle, 2002). Our findings have confirmed that all these factors are important for the consumers in choosing a platform. Although the branding or the reputation of a platform plays a big part for customers when choosing a platform, some respondents take the pre- and post-purchase services as significant factors that affect their platform choices.

Convenience and Quality of Pre- and Post-purchase Services

It became evident from our customer interview that pre-purchase service of a seller on the platform also serves as a parameter of customer's evaluation for a shop. When asked for reasons behind choosing certain platforms for shopping, convenient access to the customer service of a shop was named to be an important factor (No.1.1). One interviewee also indicated that she would trust the shop and the seller she has saved, and keep buying from the same shop (No.1.3). These views reflect the role of swift guanxi for decision making understood as the relationship between buyers and sellers in online marketplaces (Ou et al., 2014). Our findings imply that with fast replies from customer service, and trustable products and shopping process, the customer is likely to build-up a sound swift guanxi with the sellers and repeated transactions are more likely to happen.

Besides the ties between sellers and buyers, the reliability and relation of buyer with the platform was also highlighted by focus group participants: "if I buy a branded product on those platforms and it is counterfeit, I can appeal on the platform, they have their own resolution for infringement matters" (No.2.6).

From the opinions voiced by interviewees, post-purchase support appears to be very valuable for the consumers, not only as a factor increasing their trust to the platform which is helpful in resolving problems with the products and transactions, but also a factor that provides convenience when dealing with unsatisfactory purchases. In addition, platform reliability appeared to substitute the swift guanxi building between buyers and sellers. Because the response speed of the customer service of the large platforms is fast, there is no need to argue with the sellers but appealing to the platform is enough to resolve issues with products and transactions (No.1.1). As a post purchase service, logistics was also a keyword that has been mentioned by our interviewees several times, designating the convenience of the buying process. In the choice of platform for transaction, both convenience and fast delivery were named by several participants to be two important factors: "I use JD.com because of their fast logistics, I make a payment in the morning, and receive the goods in the afternoon, so convenient. They even ship out goods when it's spring festival, when all the other platforms either stop or limit their logistics." (No.1.4).

5.3.3 Engagement

Engagement in social interactions on various platforms emerged in the interviews as one of the factors influencing consumers buying behaviour and purchase decision making. When it comes to participants' engagement with social content, including product reviews, recommendations, interest group discussions, most commonly raised aspect across focus groups and individual interviews, was the importance of negative feedback about products. As one participant stated: "In fact, while buying online I am paying more attention to the negative comments, actually positive comments are useless, only negative comments represent the real customer opinion" (No. 1.4). Whereas another respondent in the individual interview also stated that negative comments matter more for buying decision, since weaknesses about the product that the seller has not mentioned might be found there, while all aspects in positive comments can be found in seller's description. Although, the importance of negative feedback for buying decision and product evaluation has been already observed previously by other scholars (Baker et al., 2016; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Prentice et al. 2019), nevertheless, the reasons for increased trust in negative feedback seems to differ from previous research. Our interview participants discussed the problem of fake deals and machine-generated feedback used to increase sales that makes the consumer feedback untrustworthy, which was pointed to be one of the biggest reasons for prioritizing negative opinions. These perceptions of online word-of-mouth and less trust in positive comments seem to stem from the excessive commercialization occurring in individual reviews, which confirms the finding of Lee et al. (2017), but also extends it with machine-generated feedback and fake deals, the strategies used by sellers that were raised by the focus group participants. Whereas this increased trust in negative WOM seem to be caused by the specifics of Chinese online commerce landscape, where unethical strategies are often leveraged by some sellers to increase their shop credibility and create fake positive reputation built on unreal purchases (Dong et al., 2014).

In making the buying decision, another aspect frequently mentioned to have great importance are comments with photos enclosed as these were believed by the majority of participants to be less likely to be fabricated. An individual interviewee and one participant of the focus group also mentioned "peer reviews" and comments with photos and videos to be "realistic" and very important, especially those describing after-use experiences, which were stated to be more "objective":

"I think peer reviews are very important. A lot of comments, comments with photos and videos are more realistic, especially concerning after-use experiences". (Yuexi Li individual Interviewee)

"Comments with graphical content are a bit more credible, because most of fake deals have only textual comments, if there is graphical content you can notice that the photos were made by a professional and photoshopped. If it is an individual sharing their evaluation, the photos will be usually made at home and it is easy to see what are the differences between the actual product and what was presented by the seller" (No.2.3)

When it comes to increased trust of consumers towards after-use, informative comments with graphical content, our findings confirm previous findings of Tien et al. (2018), the perceived credibility and usefulness of the review have indeed a positive impact on the adoption of information. These two elements of eWOM in turn are crucial in building persuasion that leads to purchase intention (Tien et al. 2018). Nevertheless, this result of our research differs from the previous finding of Hajli et. al (2014), who observed that textual content WOM from peers in social commerce is more trusted than what the company provides. Although our focus group revealed that information provided by other consumers is indeed seen as more helpful and objective than what is provided by the seller (including negative reviews) the type of content also matters. Only user-generated content that is perceived as informative and useful is regarded as valuable. In addition, the value of this content seems not to be impacted by the author of the content, whether it is a blogger or a common user (No.1.4). This shows that informational social impact is indeed coming from weak ties, where other users, normal consumers or bloggers, who are strangers, provide information support as found previously by Krämer (2015).

Lastly, according to few participants the purchasing decision was also impacted by the amount of comments, as big number was believed to signify that many people have bought the product previously, which is consistent with the findings of Yajing Diao (2019).

Completely different attitudes were presented when participants were asked about friends' recommendations. Most participants shared the opinion that if a product recommended by a friend or somebody close, they would buy it or consider the purchase, and perhaps look for more information about the product first. This shows that interviewed consumers have significantly more trust in friend reviews and recommendations, rather than other users that are strangers. Zhang et al. (2015) have previously investigated the impact of network of friends versus network of strangers and people's behaviour, decisions and beliefs. The outcomes of that study showed that when both networks are small, friends' networks will be more significant, while in the reverse situation, the strangers' network is more effective. Nevertheless, the focus group participants questioned the credibility of the WOM in the strangers' network or online network, which shows that the size of the network is not the most influential factor, but perceived credibility and informativeness of the WOM. This credibility and informativeness are seemingly associated with social WOM coming from friends' circle. Several participants admitted having bought something they did not intend/think about buying before, following a friend recommendation. One user mentioned that this type of unplanned purchases often happens on Xiaohongshu, while another participant mentioned Pinduoduo. It is however important to note that as found in previous sections in the context of platform's credibility, Pinduoduo has been associated with counterfeits and low-cost products. This implies that perhaps the friend's recommendation holds more influence on the purchasing decision than the platform's credibility itself. A recent study conducted on WeChat social commerce by Chen et al. (2019), in particular focused on friends' recommendations and showed that trust in the recommender and affection towards the product is closely linked with impulse buying, which reflects our findings regarding impulse purchases on Pinduoduo.

The positive opinions about friends' recommendation that came from the friends' circle expressed by most participants can be associated with Kelman's (1958) identity process, that occurs when one believes that the opinions of others are accurate and useful. It is possible as in case information is shared among insiders who are close friends and family, they are obliged and expected to share only accurate and trustworthy information (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). The focus group and individual interviewees revealed that this argumentation is in line with consumers habits of sharing feedback, experiences and product recommendations on other platforms than the one where the information was found, or the purchase was conducted. As WeChat was the platform indicated by participants to be used for sharing of feedback and recommendations, it shows that most recommendations and sharing happen in the closed friends' circle not exposed to bigger community or brands themselves, either direct chat, group chat or WeChat Moments. One of the interviewees revealed that content sharing and content driven discoveries through channels is not associated with shopping is a common and often occurring practice. Moreover, it shows the mutual intention of sharing useful information with friends that confirms previous findings regarding the insiders (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998):

"I share content all the time, for instance I have a friend and she was looking to buy a bag. So, while looking through Xiaohongshu and I find something (not necessary leading me to buy through Xiaohongshu, because it is more an information source than a marketplace for me) and I think this bag is really good for my friend, so I will share. And my friends also do the same (...) I think all social commerce related information is always shared on WeChat, after all information search and sharing is usually done through the mobile phone and WeChat is the main communication platform. No matter what all sharing always ends up on WeChat" (No.1.3)

5.3.4 Influence of KOLs (Wanghongs)

Wanghongs/bloggers/KOLs/influencers has been brought up many times when discussing social commerce. As Rasmus Gregersen, CEO of Nihao CPH, indicated in the interview: "They have had a pretty big voice in the Chinese market over the last 5 years (...) In case of selling to Chinese consumers you need to create trust even more than in Western markets, and influencers are the channel for that to get the attention of potential customers" (Appendix 6).

Within focus group and individual interviews, it appeared that while our interviewees are very trusting towards friends' recommendations, it is not necessarily the case with recommendations from KOLs. Consumers participating in the focus group revealed mixed feelings when it comes to product endorsements of KOLs:

“For some products recommended by KOLs that are based on a good reputation of big-name brand (...) I will be convinced to buy. But now some KOLs will launch their own brands and try to turn their followers into consumers” (No.2.3)

“I just like to watch their vlog and that is all (...) if a brand is launched by a KOL, I will definitely not buy it. For a new brand, I am more willing to believe in those which were launched by a big platform than the one created by a KOL” (No.2.1)

The majority of the focus group participants raised doubts not only about influencers’ own brands, but also about the content created by KOLs and its trustworthiness, especially when the content is sponsored:

“I believe the product (KOLs) recommended is not from their own experience but for commercial purpose. I would rather believe common users since their recommendation is based on their own experiences.” (Yuexi Li individual interviewee)

When it comes to the reasoning behind the negative attitudes towards influencers and the content created by them, besides the previously mentioned lack of content quality and too strong focus on commercialization of influencers’ own brands or sponsored brands, several participants also mentioned other reasons of distrust towards KOLs content. These include a lack of social credit and lack of fit between promoted brand and the KOL own image that were also pointed out before by other scholars (Liu et al., 2015; Zulli, 2018; Xiong et al. (2018):

“Many brands do not consider KOLs when choosing brand spokesperson, because the image of these KOLs do not match with the brands.” (No.2.6)

“Their credit is not enough for me to believe them, ((Douyin)) videos of KOLs are more for entertainment” (No.1.1)

These views of influencers show that consumers treat their content with scepticism. One of the possible explanations of the interviewee’s distrust could also be De Cremer et al.’s (2015) argument that in the Chinese context one needs to build relationship first in order to eliminate the default distrust. Zhao et al. (2018) have noticed that credibility of opinion leaders is important in maximizing their influence on followers in e-commerce and our findings show that it is also crucial in social commerce. One way to build the relationship of the followers and build credibility is to provide useful and informative feedback that was already mentioned in the previous section. Besides, as stated previously, there is a clear difference between positive and negative feedback. Lee et al. (2011) suggested that consumers do not necessarily take actions that are suggested, but the positive influences strengthens the intention to shop. Whereas, in our focus group interview (1), compared to positive comments on one product, interviewees agreed that they find negative feedback on the product is more trustworthy, regardless of who is giving the feedback:

“I believe in negative comments that KOLs share, than positive information towards product”. (No.1.1)

Besides, once again social impact and Kelman’s (1958) identity process appeared to be significant in affecting one’s attitudes toward products promoted by KOLs and minimize negative attitudes toward content promoted by the influencers:

“When I watch a vlog of KOLs, if I don’t know anything about the products in this vlog, I will definitely not buy it. But if I find that a lot of people have bought it, then I might also want to try it. Although sometimes I may not be interested in such goods, while I have seen my friends have them, then I may change my mind.” (Yuexi Li Interviewee)

Some participants of both groups admitted having their own favourite bloggers whom they follow because of their content is matching with their interest which reflects Kelman’s (1958) internalization process:

“I think the product that shared by my favorite KOLs is very attractive to me”. (No.2.3)

“There are maybe some bloggers with really strong sense social responsibility, who after using the product are able to give a more objective review” (speaking about reviews on JD.com) (No.1.1)

From these findings, it appears that KOLs similarly to sellers and platforms need to combat the default distrust among Chinese consumers that was raised by De Cremer (2015). In order to be able to have influential power and gain trustworthiness that can lead to internalization process, four main obstacles were pointed out by focus group participants that need to be tackled: lack of content quality, too big focus on commercialization of influencers’ own brands or sponsored brands, lack of social credit and lack of fit between promoted brand and the KOL own image. These aspects are in turn also important for platforms and brands that chose Wanghong’s for collaboration.

5.3.5 Advertisement

Interestingly, participants of focus groups revealed different attitudes towards content created by brands like advertisements and the content provided by KOLs. Several interviewees showed a willingness to collect information about new products of their favorite brands by subscribing to newsletters or following their favorite promotional accounts:

"There are two main approaches for me to collect new information. The first is to subscribe as a member and receive promotional emails ((from favored brands)), and the second is to follow my favorite brands and stores on the platform." (No.1.3).

Especially accounts promoting content that matches consumers' interests and consumption patterns as well as offering quality content that is standardized and consistent was named to be attractive, which is similar to the findings regarding KOL's content. Similarly, it is also consistent with Kelman's internalization, which indicates that an individual believes that a certain behavior or a person matches his/her existing beliefs and interests and contributes to the optimization of his/her own values:

"I have a favorite WeChat Subscription account and I really found the content of which is interesting. This account reflects the real situation of every individual in the first-tier cities in China vividly. This subscription account is targeted at the new middle class of China, so the brands choosing by this platform is selective. For example, this account will only choose high-end brand to fit which followers' consumption." (No.2.3)

While content described as "creative" was named to be attention-grabbing by the majority of interviewees, too frequent advertising was named to be "annoying". Participants also showed positive attitudes toward personalized and recommended content on Instagram, which was stated to be "very accurate" and matching users' interests. Besides some participants claimed that despite willingness to read brand advertisements and promotional material, they are unlikely to be affected by it in decision-making. As one focus group participant stated:

"I would like to read these advertisements because I can acquire some useful information about certain product, but I don't think these ads are able to affect my decision." (No.2.4)

Yet, despite the reported questionable impact of advertisements on consumers' decisions, the quoted statement above confirms findings of Bonchek and France (2014) that engagement with advertisements is driven by effective personalization. Nevertheless, on the other hand, our interviewees also appeared to be sensitive towards excessive use of their personal information to create this recommended or personalized content, which is an important message for content creators.

5.3.6 Summary of Findings on Consumers

The findings collected in this study have revealed important insights about Chinese consumers, their preferences, purchasing journey as well as significant factors that impact their buying decisions. The focus group participants expressed positive opinions towards social commerce associated mainly with social interactions, involvement in social networking, friends' recommendations and various forms of user generated content. However, faced with a wide variety of social commerce platforms with growing number of functions and many information channels, the interviewed consumers appeared to be more cautious and suspicious towards the choice of platform and product information sources today. The trust aspect has been mentioned directly and indirectly numerous times in relation to platforms, product reviews and comments as well as the content produced by KOLs and influencers.

When it comes to platforms, within both focus group and individual interviews, every individual named platforms they favour the most and the main determining factor for their choice was credibility. According to the interviewed consumers, some platforms like Tmall are more trustworthy than others due to their consumer and intellectual property protection systems that secure product quality and transaction safety. With more choices in the internet era, consumers are more likely to lose patience when the quality of content and services do not match their expectations. Most of the interviewees agreed that they are likely to switch to another platform if they stumble upon a counterfeit product or have negative experiences on the platform. Moreover, the majority of interviewees showed a tendency to compare different channels for price and product-related information before the purchase. In such a low-trust society like China (De Cremer, 2015), consumers prefer to choose platforms for purchase which are committed to the quality of goods, provide secure logistics and after-sales services (Tmall, JD.com, Xiaohongshu). Platforms' commitment to meet customers' expectations about the purchase enable consumers to develop and maintain trust with the platform. As long as the consumer trust a platform or a particular shop on the platform, they tend to stick to it as they already know what can be expected from their experience. Besides, platform's reliability appeared to be more important than swift guanxi, buyer-seller relations in situations when experience is unsatisfactory. Although consumers showed a willingness to try out new platforms, it happens mainly due to social network's impact or positive friends' experiences and recommendations. Douyin, Xiaohongshu and Pinduoduo were all associated with impulsive purchases that happen either because of friends' recommendations, invitation to a group purchase or social identification with one's social network. Within those three, only Xiaohongshu was named to be a platform for occasional purchases driven by one's need rather than an impulse, including low-value products as food or snacks. Besides, Taobao platform was also a specific case among the other platforms discussed by focus group participants. Because there is a wide variety of low-priced goods, consumers seem to be less sensitive towards counterfeits, since the potential loss is not significant. Therefore, purchase of low-value goods might not only be determined by trust in a platform.

When it comes to trust related with product reviews and comments as well as all forms of user generated content regarding a product, focus group participants shared an opinion that negative information shared by other users or KOLs is more credible than product information shared by sellers. Most of the interviewees were also more willing to share negative feedback on the platform where the purchase was conducted rather than positive. The willingness of users to participate in commenting or writing reviews seem to be weaker when they are satisfied with the products or services they bought, however, a few participants indicated a strong intent to share feedback even when their experience was positive. When it comes to searching for reviews about products, consumers appeared to value informative content including post-purchase experiences. They were very sensitive and suspicious towards sponsored content, including traditional display advertising, for instance on Weibo. They found content that is entertaining and personalised, but still holds the informative value, the most attractive and worthy to follow. Even if the content is produced by a KOL or a blogger, but consumers see it as "realistic" useful and informative, it will be perceived positively.

Some of the participants admitted trusting their favourite KOLs and vloggers and found products promoted by them to be attractive. However, more consumers participating in the focus group showed suspicious attitudes towards KOLs. They discussed that more and more content generated by KOLs is actually aiming at advertising, but not sharing valuable experiences with the product. Moreover, few participants pointed out that often brand promoted by a KOL does not match their personality and therefore, such content is not perceived to be attractive. As a result, some of the interviewed consumers argued that the information promoted by KOL is not reliable. However, even though consumers were suspicious about products promoted by KOLs, some also mentioned that if they saw friends buying that product, they would generate a shopping desire.

The friend's recommendation, word of mouth and social influences from friends' circle were revealed to have a very big impact on consumers' actions and decisions. As found by the China Internet Network Information Center (2015) in an online market research, 77.5% of respondents indicated that positive word of mouth is crucial in their decision making while price was indicated only by around 72% (Li & Du, 2017). Interestingly, a friend's influence is able to not only make an individual consumer to conduct his purchase on another platform than one's trust the most like Pinduoduo, but also buy a product recommended by KOL that might not have been considered reliable before. That implies that factors determining the platform's choice discussed in the previous section as well as attitudes toward advertising and KOLs might lose its significance when friend's influence is involved in the process.

This finding contradicts the findings of Corbitt et al. (2003), who highlighted that trust in online commerce is influenced by three factors: reputation of online commerce in general, consumers own experiences and specific platforms' trustworthiness and perceived risks. Although, in our study these factors identified by previous scholars were found to be important when determining the decision to join online shopping and platform's choice, the most significant factor was the social influence which was not considered in the study of Corbitt et al. (2003). Nevertheless, because Corbitt et al. (2003) focus was mainly on e-commerce environment, therefore the discrepancy with the findings of this study may come from the difference between SC and e-commerce. In the following section, based on these findings, the consumer journey in SC will be explained and factors influencing this journey and the corresponding purchasing behaviour will be evaluated.

5.4 Analysis of Consumers

5.4.1 Consumer Journey in SC and Platform Stages

The focus groups and individual interviews with consumers have shed some light on the consumer purchasing journey. It became evident that consumers follow non-linear purchase path with number of various digital channels and touchpoints that could include brand-owned, partner-owned, consumer-owned and external touchpoints distinguished by Lemon and Verhoef (2016). Moreover, all of these touchpoints may have varying effect on individual's behavior and purchasing decisions, however the social touchpoints appeared to have a prominent role and big influential power in the purchasing journey.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the choice of certain platforms, from the collected data it appears that in the eyes of consumers during their purchasing journey, every platform has its own main usages:

Table 3: Main Usages of Platforms

Platform	Main usages
Taobao	need-driven purchases, checking comments/reviews
Weibo	source of recommended content, advertisements, influencers, UGC, social interactions/experience sharing
WeChat	subscription accounts advertising interaction, recommendation/experience sharing
Douyin	entertainment
Pinduoduo	impulsive purchases
Xiaohongshu	information search, recommended content, KOL, need-driven purchases, impulsive purchases

(Source: Personal collection)

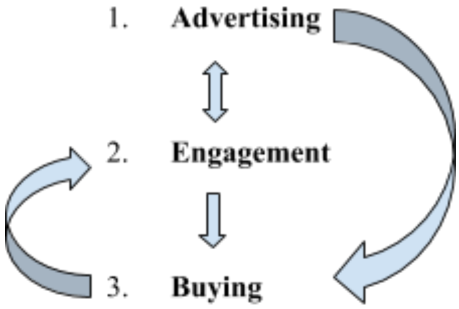
As appears from the chart above that was based on interviewees statements, different platforms are being used for different purposes. According to these functions, we can distinguish three platform stages that also include other platforms mentioned by focus group participants. These are outside of the scope of this study.

Table 4: Platform Stages and Activities

Stage	**Activities**	**Platforms**
Advertisement (content exposure)	• KOLs and celebrities • brand's promotional content • UGC (product reviews)	Xiaohongshu Weibo WeChat Douyin
Engagement	• interest groups • comments • content sharing through different channels	Xiaohongshu Weibo WeChat Taobao Hupu
Buying	• need-driven purchases • impulsive purchases	Taobao Tmall JD Hupu Pinduoduo Xiaohongshu

(Source: Personal collection)

Figure 21: Platform Stages



(Source: Personal collection)

As illustrated above, a consumer may enter their journey at a platform related to any stage (1, 2, 3) and move in between regardless of the sequence and direction. Moreover, the journey can also stop on any platform. In addition, it should be taken into consideration that because all platforms have commercial features supporting seamless transaction process, it is possible to conduct a purchase at any of them, as indicated previously in the platform's analysis. Therefore, it should be highlighted that these platform stages are only reflecting the preferences and behaviour of the consumers participating in the focus groups and individual interviews for this study. These stages are understood as follows. First, the advertising stage includes sponsorship campaigns with KOLs and celebrities, promotional articles, posts, videos, product reviews as well as content recommended to users by platform based on big data. According to Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) consumer experience journey, the touchpoints at this stage include brand-owned touchpoints as the brand own content, partner-owned touchpoints as KOL campaigns and consumer-owned touchpoints as product-reviews and other UGC. Engagement stage involves mainly social touchpoints that involves all kinds of social interaction activities, commenting and discussing with other users, as well as sharing recommendations and experiences through different channels. Lastly, the buying stage is related mainly with the transaction process and constitute of brand- and partner-owned touchpoints. Based on the usage of different platforms described by our interviewees, we are able to appoint Pinduoduo, Xiaohongshu, Taobao as well as mentioned by interviewees Tmall, Hupu and JD (that are not a part of this study) at the buying stage, while the rest of platforms are included in both Advertising and Engagement stages.

Buying Stage

Depending on the type of products and their associated values, consumers follow different paths and might even skip initial consideration and move straight into transaction, meaning that they would enter a platform at the "buying" stage directly. Some focus group participants also discussed this possibility in relation with trusted platforms or favourite shops on specific platforms. What's more, because friends' recommendations and social interactions through social touchpoints play a crucial role, it seems to be likely also when a product has been recommended by a friend, or due to strong social identification with one's social network (and the influence of Kelman's identity process on consumer's purchasing decision) which illustrates a consumer moving from a platform at the "engagement" stage to a platform at the "buying" stage. On the other hand, as a product's information is accessible through various channels like social media and social networking sites, content-driven discovery (from UGC, videos etc.) on Weibo, WeChat, Douyin or Xiaohongshu can lead consumer straight to the purchase, as it has been shown in the graphical illustrations for the respective platforms in Platform Findings. Besides mentioned previously: the platform's own reputation and credibility, this behavior may be also driven by the internalization process distinguished by Kelman (1958). As one of our focus group interviewees admitted being attracted to the products advertised by his favorite KOL, it indicates that the move from a platform at "advertising" stage directly to a platform at the buying "stage" may be caused by the fact that KOL or the influencer is matching consumers interests and beliefs. Here, it is however important to mention that participants in our focus groups associated three platforms with impulse purchases that might be triggered by content or friend's recommendations (Xiaohongshu, Pinduoduo, Douyin). Although according to the chart above, Douyin is not being used at the buying stage, nevertheless as mentioned previously in the Platform findings, there is a possibility that purchase may occur elsewhere than on a platform located at the "buying" stage, including platforms like Weibo or WeChat since these platforms also have commercial features supporting seamless transaction.

Engagement ↔ Advertisement Stages

After completing the purchase, consumers might move to the platforms located at the "engagement" stage. This is not only to rate their purchase, give feedback or share their experience through partner-owned or consumer-owned touchpoints, but also to interact with other users and one's social network through social touchpoints by sharing recommendations with friends or reviews in the WeChat Moments, individual or group chat rooms. As the majority of focus group participants admitted sharing mostly negative feedback through brand-owned or partner-owned touchpoints, there were also a few consumers showing a willingness to share positive feedback and send recommendations to their friends through consumer and social touchpoints.

Besides, consumers might also move between platforms located at the advertising and engagement stages before the purchase. One of the focus group participants indicated that while personalized content and attractive advertisements do not impact decision-making, they definitely enhance his engagement with the content. In addition, a few focus group participants admitted that while they are not keen on buying products promoted by Wanghongs (KOL), they would want to try such a product out in case their friends have already purchased the product. This implies that consumers can get to know a new product from advertisement and turn to ask friend's recommendation for more information. Compared to the positive information from advertisement and Wanghongs' promotion, they would trust their friends' opinions and need comprehensive information which includes a negative side of the product or the experience. This negative feedback can of course come from the KOL himself, but also from a close friend or a common user's comment or review, who is a stranger. That implies switching from brand-owned touchpoints (advertisement) or partner-owned touchpoint (content created by influencer) to social or consumer-owned touchpoints. Not only does this multichannel behaviour, illustrated by switching from advertising to the engagement stage, highlight the significance of friend's impact, but it also shows the important role of informational social impact (another user's feedback who is a stranger). The other way around, consumers also generate curiosity when certain product is getting popular among their friends or they receive a friend's recommendation and want to consider purchasing the product, but due to uncertainty would like to search for more information concerning the product. These two scenarios have been described by our focus group participants and they illustrate the last potential switching behaviour from and to platforms at the "engagement" and "advertisement" stages.

While discussing platform stages and the consumer journey, it is of the highest importance to highlight the multichannel phenomena that was discovered in the findings. Focus group participants admitted using more than one platform to compare the price and product information, but also share their experiences and product recommendations on other platforms than the one where the information was found, or the purchase was conducted. Because of that, it appears that consumer may access different platforms at every stage, whether it is advertising, engagement or buying. Different activities that consumer engage in might not be limited to occur on one platform but several, depending on the situation, as it was described previously. This complexity in platform usage reported by the consumers interviewed in this study have been considered previously in the Platform Analysis section. The following section will present the findings based on interviews with market experts. These findings will also be compared and contrasted with the knowledge collected about consumers and platforms.

5.5 Brands (Market Experts' Perspective)

As the last stage of our data collection, in-depth interviews with three market experts who work with the Chinese market have been conducted to gain a better understanding of the experiences with social commerce from the brand's perspective. In this section, several valuable insights shared by the market experts will be presented including their opinions on social commerce and experiences when it comes to the cooperation with Chinese social commerce platforms and Wanghongs as well as the challenges faced on Chinese market. These findings will be helpful for the formulation of strategic plan for brands willing to enter the Chinese market.

5.5.1 Platform Ease the Way

The interviewed market experts all agreed that B2C sales in China are difficult without the brand awareness and brand presence on the local market. Nowadays, Chinese consumers are faced with a wide variety of channels to gather information from and to shop. Therefore, to reach the target consumer is a challenge not only for local brands, but especially for foreign brands that are unfamiliar with the Chinese context and the local platforms. This challenge is mainly caused by the common uncertainty about product quality among local consumers and the unfair practices conducted by sellers to create positive brand reputation, that were found in this study. As Rasmus Gregersen, the CEO of NihaoCPH stated: "It requires time and awareness you create about product, so this is probably the most challenging thing for us now. You must be relevant and create the awareness" (Appendix 6).

WeChat

Our interviewees agreed that using local Chinese platforms makes it easier to acquire and reach Chinese consumers. Two of our interviewees highlighted the importance of WeChat for the marketing strategy on the Chinese market. From their perspective, WeChat is an ideal platform at the starting point because of its comprehensive functions and large amount of user base. First and foremost, the CEO of BingBang Teitur Jónasson valued the role of WeChat as a platform that works as a website does in the West, providing grounds for storytelling to create the brands' awareness. Similarly to the CEO of NihaoCPH Rasmus Gregersen, he regarded WeChat as a "home base" as well as "funnel location", where the company can introduce their brands to WeChat users through an official account and connect it to a sales channel within the platform. Thus, WeChat features that support sales like mini-programs or official accounts are perceived by these market experts as a crucial starting point for marketing and sales. Although it is known that WeChat is a closed social platform on which users can only communicate with their WeChat friends, the CEO of BingBang does not see that as a shortage: "If the consumer finds (...) any kind of content, information, anything. If it fits to the needs of the consumer, then you are solving consumers' problems, even if they do not buy, they are getting brand awareness" (Appendix 6 & 7).

The perceptions of WeChat by the interviewed market experts reflect the reported usage of the platform by the focus group participants and the individual interviewees. Although interviewed consumers admitted using this platform mainly to interact and share recommendations or experiences with their social circle, it is also seen as a platform where consumers follow their favorite subscription accounts with interesting content. Therefore, this is how brands have a chance to build brand awareness through WeChat. Nevertheless, based on consumers statements, the platform has been categorized at the advertisement and engagement stages, which raises doubts in regard to the effectiveness of using WeChat as a sales channel. Kelly Wenjun Zhao from Ehub Nordic admitted that while the company has established its own WeChat shop, their sales showed much better results on the Tmall marketplace (Appendix 8).

Sina Weibo

Although the interviewees Teitur Jónasson and Rasmus Gregersen agreed that WeChat can be used to create a presence and publish content, other platforms are also needed to drive engagement and interact with customers. Rasmus Gregersen from NihaoCPH mentioned Weibo is a noticeable channel for interaction and getting consumers' feedback: "On Weibo we can have another style, people can give us their opinions, interact" (Appendix 6). Hence, NihaoCPH uses their Weibo profile as the default platform to test products. However, both interviewees noticed that due to the large amount of content on Weibo appearing on a daily basis, it is difficult to stand out and attract target consumers. Moreover, both Teitur Jónasson and Rasmus Gregersen noticed that advertising campaigns on the platform do not give the desired results. Based on the experience of NihaoCPH in the Chinese market, the best strategy is to create content regularly that is interesting for their audience: "If we create something interesting for our followers, they might share with their friends, then their friends see it and maybe follow us (...) that is when we get exposure (...) but if you do not hit the right trend or the right story, then it is gone " (Appendix 6).

In case of Weibo, opinions of market experts are conforming to the opinions of participants of focus groups and individual interviewees. While Weibo has been assigned to the advertisement and engagement stages during the consumer journey, just like WeChat, interviewed consumers associated this platform much more with a channel for information gathering and content exposure. Especially focus group participants mentioned diverse forms of content accessible on Weibo, including recommended content, as relevant advertisements, UGC, content created by influencers or celebrities.

Xiaohongshu

Differently from NihaoCPH, BingBang strategy puts more attention towards Xiaohongshu platform than Weibo, mainly due to its good connectivity with WeChat and the Xiaohongshu's marketplace. Whereas for Rasmus Gregersen Xiaohongshu is a good platform for getting a meaningful feedback from consumers, what they prefer, expect and buy. Especially for brands that are new on the market, Xiaohongshu can help in determining whether there is demand for their products and get a better understanding of Chinese consumers: "we have so much trust in this platform and the content, we can easily look up brands, see the comments and what people say or buy" (Appendix 6).

In addition, Xiaohongshu was also mentioned to be useful for creating brand awareness and attracting consumers as well as getting feedback about the products because of large base of KOLs that are active on this platform:

"If you are not used to Chinese market, you can get quite good feedback from them ((Wanghongs)). You ship them a bunch of products, pay them and all that and then you get feedback. They themselves may give you their own feedback on it, but if you follow the comments in the post or video, then you collect all that feedback and take it back to the brand." (Appendix 6)

The perceptions of this platform by market experts and its significance are also in consonance with the information that has been collected on Chinese consumers. Our interviewed consumers associated

Xiaohongshu platform with all three stages: advertising, engagement and buying. It was reported to be used mainly for information search, but also for purchases through the Xiaohongshu marketplace.

5.5.2 Wanghong Campaigns: are they really worthy?

Besides Xiaohongshu, Kelly Wenjun Zhao from Ehub Nordic also mentioned brand promotions in collaboration with Wanghongs on Taobao through live-streams and Weitao as good solution to raise the brand awareness for less-known brands. Nevertheless, although Wanghongs were named to be effective "channel for brands to get the attention of potential customers" (Appendix 6), all of our interviewees raised some doubts towards Wanghongs in China. To begin with, Wanghongs were stated to be too expensive to afford and the returns from KOL campaigns were also stated to be uncertain. From BingBang's experience "it is very hard to figure out which ones are real", moreover as Rasmus Gregersen stated: "if they ((brands)) have to pay 50 or 100 thousand for marketing campaign, that is quite a lot for medium- or bigger size company" (Appendix 7).

As explained by Kelly Wenjun Zhao, the brand manager from Ehub Nordic, in recent years the market for Wanghong has increased drastically, while the threshold for Wanghong started getting lower. In Rasmus Gregersen's point of view, cooperating with Wanghongs is a way of getting trust and attention, but it is difficult to find the right one that fits your brand. This opinion is supported by an example made by the CEO of BingBang: "If you market cosmetics or skin care with beautiful celebrity or actor, half of their followers might be following because of their personality not looks, so it might not be a right fit" (Appendix 7). The observations on Wanghongs presented by the market experts to a large extent reflect the opinions raised by focus group participants, who also criticized brands that are being promoted by influencers who do not fit with their brand image.

5.5.3 Hardships in relation to Trust Building

"Trust is a huge issue, it is on the top of mind all the time" (Appendix 7)

Although brands can make good usage of Chinese platforms as well as Wanghong to win the Chinese consumers, it is still a challenging task for foreign brands entering Chinese market to build a trustful relationship with their consumers. Trust is the fundamental aspect of conducting business in China and Chinese consumers do not trust easily since they live in a counterfeit environment which is pushing them to do research on most of the brands they find on the market

(Zhang, Bian and Zhu, 2013). The way to gain trust of NIHAO CPH is to keep the content on platforms to be relevant and consistent. Whereas for BingBang, the way to build trust is through establishing a strong brand image that connects Nordic and Chinese culture: “We want to do the exact opposite from big Chinese marketplace like Taobao, Tmall etc. We want to create something unique, blend Nordic culture with Chinese culture. Go through niche audience, that will be attracted by that.” (Appendix 7).

5.5.4 Converging O2O activities

“You need the right strategy, not every channel is good for every brand” (Appendix 6)

All of these market experts have indicated that China is a tough market and that competition is tough. In this situation, it is important to establish the right marketing strategy, because not every channel is good for every brand. As noticed by Kelly Wenjun Zhao from Ehub Nordic, it is slightly easier for brands with an already established reputation on the Chinese market than for small brands that are not known.

In order to bridge this gap experienced by smaller and less-recognized brands, both BingBang and NihaoCPH adapted offline marketing strategies that support their online activities. Since BingBang is targeting mainly Chinese tourists, all the products marketed by them have a QR code on the physical packaging that helps customers to find a reliable sales channel where the product can be purchased after they come back to China. NihaoCPH is also utilizing QR codes to direct consumers to the brand accounts, nevertheless, their offline marketing strategies are conducted mainly within mainland China. The company is publishing print-out journals in English and Chinese with QR codes placed under every article that lead to official channels of brands were more information can be found. Although according to Rasmus Gregersen, digital marketing strategies in China are highly effective, it is often the case that Danish brands are more inclined to adapt offline strategies. Print-out magazines give brands more confidence that their promotional article “goes in the hands of Chinese consumers” (Appendix 6). Unlike the likes and views on digital platforms, with a print-out magazine, brands are able to know exactly the number of magazines that were shipped and sold which gives more realistic picture about marketing efforts and their effectiveness (Appendix 6).

5.6 Summary

In the findings and analysis section, we have analyzed six chosen platforms in the field of social commerce in China. We have used secondary data to gain a better understanding of the respective platforms' operations, their business strategies and subsequently, we applied the framework to analyze their functions that are related to social commerce. In this assessment, findings collected from the interviews with the Chinese consumers have also been considered. The analysed platforms were compared, and as a result grouped into three distinctive platform types: relationship-based, content-based platforms and transaction-based platforms. Relationship-based platforms are the ones that have strong social interaction attributes, strong user stickiness to the platform and are characterised by stronger ties in social networks. Content-based platforms have strong "种草 (planting weeds)" functions that are related to functions that support building-up awareness and "长草(growing weeds)" functions related to attracting users' interest and driving engagement. These platforms make extensive use of big data and are characterized by weaker ties in social networks. Whereas the transaction-based platforms have strong "拔草 (pulling weeds)" functions related to the transaction itself. They have distinctive features that together increase the transaction convenience. Moreover, they make extensive use of pre- & post-purchase monetary incentives. However, this study also revealed that regardless of platform classification into different types, all analyzed platforms in this study are constantly improving and developing their functionalities in an effort to remain competitive and relevant for their users.

In terms of the consumer findings and analysis part, the data was analyzed according to common themes that stem from the data. The focus groups and in-depth interviews revealed several important observations that contributed to our knowledge about social commerce in China and about Chinese consumers. Nowadays, Chinese consumers are faced with a wide variety of social commerce platforms with a growing number of functions and many information channels. That's why the focus groups' participants appeared to be more cautious and suspicious towards the choice of platform and information sources. The most determining factor for platform choice was named to be credibility. Most of the interviewees agreed that they are likely to switch to another platform if they stumble upon a counterfeit product or have negative experiences on the platform. Moreover, when it comes to purchasing, the platforms that are committed to the quality of goods, provide secure logistics and after-sales services were preferred by most of the interviewees (Tmall, JD.com, Xiaohongshu). It became evident that a platform's commitment to meet customers' expectations about the purchase enable consumers to develop and maintain trust with the platform. Nevertheless, some participants showed less sensitivity to a platform's trustworthiness in relation to purchase of low-value goods even when these goods are purchased from platforms that are also associated with counterfeits as Taobao.

Besides credibility as a determinant of platform's choice, social influence, word of mouth and friends' recommendations were found to play a crucial role in the decision-making process. Focus groups' participants showed willingness to try out new platforms which might not be originally associated with credibility. They were also willing to buy a product promoted by KOLs after positive friends' recommendation or after hearing positive opinions shared in one's social network. Even though most consumers shared mainly negative opinions about KOLs and influencers when it comes to sponsored content, advertising, lack of fit between KOL's personality and brand image as well as the lack of reliability, social impact appeared to be very strong. In addition, some of the participants admitted trusting their favorite KOLs and vloggers and found products promoted by them to be attractive. The majority of the interviewed consumers appeared to value informative content including post-purchase experiences as well as negative information about the product shared by other users, but also KOLs. This informative content was perceived as more credible than the product information shared by sellers.

Combining our understanding of the platforms and the collected information from focus groups and individual interviews with Chinese customers, we found that based on the different main usages of the platforms, consumers use the platforms differently for various purposes. And according to their main usages, we distinguished three platform stages: advertisement, engagement and transaction stage. These stages are also used to describe the consumer journey in social commerce. Consumer can enter and end the journey at any stage. Moreover, they can move in between different stages without any distinctive pattern depending on the specific situation or the product they are purchasing. Nevertheless, it should be noted that as found in platform analysis, regardless of the platform's categorization to different stages, which is based on their main usages reported by consumers that was presented in table 4, the platforms analyzed in this study have the functions and features to support all stages in the consumer journey. Therefore, the platform stages model may also cover other multichannel behaviors and paths not raised by our interviewed consumers.

Lastly, we have interviewed three market experts on their experiences and perceptions towards social commerce, Chinese social commerce platforms, cooperation with Wanghongs and the challenges they face in connection with the Chinese market. All of the interviewed market experts shared the opinion that using the right local Chinese platforms makes it much easier to acquire and reach Chinese consumers. The mostly discussed platforms in the social commerce context involved WeChat, Weibo and Xiaohongshu. Similarly to the opinions of interviewed consumers, WeChat was named to be a good tool to create brand presence and brand awareness, but with regard to sales it might not be the most effective channel for every brand (Rasmus & Kelly, Appendix 6 &11). In terms of engagement and interaction with customers, market experts referred to Weibo and Xiaohongshu platforms. The CEO of NihaoCPH appreciated both Weibo and Xiaohongshu for the possibility to use them as a tool to test products and get consumers' feedback. On the other hand, the CEO of BingBang highlighted good connectivity of Xiaohongshu platform with WeChat and the usefulness of Xiaohongshu marketplace.

Building brand awareness and trust were named to be two of the most challenging aspects for brands that are not well known in China. When it comes to brand awareness, besides using WeChat and Weibo to push content and create brand presence, market experts also mentioned collaborating with Wanghongs and using livestreams as an effective solution for small and less recognized brands. Besides, collaboration with Wanghongs was named to be a good way to gain consumers' feedback and test the products before putting them on the market. It was also named an effective marketing strategy for brands with already established reputation to strengthen the brand image. Nevertheless, all market experts raised an issue of potential risk of inconsistency between influencer's own image and brand image which may negatively impact the brand reputation as it was discussed by focus groups' participants. When it comes to the trust aspect, building strong brand image and creating the relevant content were mentioned to be the crucial strategies. In addition, market experts have also expressed the importance of combining online and offline business activities, where in the process they realized the importance of bringing along technologies.

6. Discussion

In this paper, the social commerce in China has been examined from the perspective of platforms, consumers and brands. From the consumer-perspective, social commerce created additional value during shopping thanks to the enhanced engagement and interactions with other consumers, brands and brand representatives. The availability and convenience of collecting and exchanging information online through a wide range of channels and touchpoints lead consumers to become more empowered and enables them to make more informed purchasing decisions. Taking the importance of trust-building in every aspect of life in China, including interpersonal and business relationships, social commerce platforms provided good foundations for this process. However, as noticed by CEO of NihaoCPH, social commerce in China should not be seen as a new phenomenon, because it has been present for a long time offline. Following this understanding, the widespread use of online channels for shopping and networking has impacted the rise of social commerce online. On the other hand, as shown by interviewees' associations with social commerce and implications from the collected secondary data, from platform perspective, this highly interactive purchase behaviour not only enhanced the loyalty of users to certain platforms but also improved existing and new users' retention. Consumers became more loyal to certain platforms not only due to their reputation, own positive experiences and presence of their friends on the platform, but also interesting content that is being recommended to them and the presence of their favourite opinion leaders and brands. Lastly, from the brand-perspective, we learned that the spread of information across a variety of channels and a wide range of influences, made it harder for brands to control their brand image. The rise of social commerce was associated by market experts with more challenges when it comes to stirring more engagement and choosing the right platforms to reach their target consumers. Moreover, market experts recognized the challenge of choosing the right partners as influencers and brand representatives to share their business image and values with consumers. Besides, according to the interviewed market experts, more engagement with customers through social commerce channels also meant an opportunity for brands to better adapt their products to the consumer's preferences and needs.

In the following sections, our findings on social commerce are discussed in more detail and their meaning is interpreted with the consideration of previous findings in this area. Firstly, the consumer-perspective is presented when it comes to the consumer purchasing and decision-making journey in social commerce as well as the role of social aspects in this journey.

Then, our observations from the background section will be compared with the consumer-perspective and reported behaviours, especially when it comes to the recent changes in the regulatory context. As noted by Wang and Zhang (2012), the components of social commerce are interdependent and require integration with others in order to propose successful strategies to engage in social commerce. Thirdly, the platform-perspective is discussed, especially when it comes to the relation between the platform stages analysed in the consumer analysis section and the platform types in the platform analysis section of this thesis. This part is then followed by suggestions for platforms that engage in social commerce in China. Lastly, the brand-perspective will be presented together with the implications for brands that come from the new social commerce environment in China and the discoveries about consumers and platforms conducted in this study. Finally, the limitations and future implications will be discussed.

6.1 Consumer-perspective: The Consumer Journey in SC

In this study, consumers were found to follow a non-linear and multichannel path in their purchasing and decision-making journey in social commerce. While multi-channelling behaviour was found to be closely related to Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) consumer experience journey that considers multiple channels and touchpoints at every stage, the scholars still perceived the journey as a linear process. Our findings challenged this perception and extended the previous model by applying the platform stages that illustrate the non-linearity and still maintain the omnichannel understanding of the consumer experience. The omnichannel understanding implies that besides channels and touchpoints included in the consumer journey, different motivations and influences, including social interaction and social impact, have been taken into consideration. Previous models, including the commonly used model by Edelman and Singer (2015), were not found to be applicable in the social commerce context, due to their lack of this understanding. That is namely, the consideration of multi-channelling behaviour as well as the possibility of the journey starting from social interaction with other consumers, KOLs or brands that are situated at the engagement stage and was noted before by Bonchek and France (2014). The Edelman and Singer's (2015) model only included the possibility of journey starting from the advertisement and buying stage. Our research findings and analysis indicate that in social commerce, social interactions and social influences play a crucial role in shaping the purchasing journey, while the influence of platforms and brands or brands' partners like influencers or celebrity endorsers play a secondary role. The purchasing stages utilized in this study to illustrate the purchasing journey of consumers in social commerce reflects all four aspects of a good model distinguished by Bonchek and France (2014). It depicts a non-linear path to purchase, addressing the complexity of social influences at every stage where a consumer might go through different touchpoints. Moreover, it also considers the role of influence from other consumers. This is also named as social informational impact as well as other consumers that are the "insiders", namely friends and family, in addition to Wanghongs and celebrities. All these aspects differentiate the consumer journey in e-commerce from the consumer journey in social commerce with social interactions and engagement at the core.

Regulatory Context

When discussing the consumer journey in social commerce, it should be noted that recent changes in the legal context in China, as described in the background section (2.1), might have an impact on consumer behaviour and decision-making path in the future. Besides the social impacts, like social identity or friends' WOM, on consumer behaviour, platform and brand, or brands' partners like KOLs, also play an influential role on consumers. Our interviews revealed that consumers share many worries with regards to a platform's reputation and reliability that affect their choices. Too commercialized content, sponsored advertising, counterfeits, fake reviews and ratings, all the main issues mentioned by the consumers as factors that affect their channel or platform choice has been already addressed by the regulations of China's new e-commerce law with the goal to create a safer shopping environment online. Therefore, the corresponding changes in the consumer behaviour should be researched by scholars in the future. Nevertheless, possible changes in consumer behaviour and decision making, different usage of different platforms are not expected to affect the platform stages. Platform stages model is flexible and changes with regards to specific platforms; platforms being categorized to different stages. Therefore, they will not affect its structure. Based on the platform analysis, platform's efforts to adapt to the future changes in consumer behaviour is discussed as a part of the following sections.

6.2 Platform-perspective: existing SC landscape and the future trends

As indicated in the literature review and discussed in the platform analysis section, previous scholars have made a distinction between different types of platforms in social commerce. Han et al. (2018) summarized the most common types discussed by previous scholars namely social media platform that combines social media features with e-commerce features (like WeChat or Weibo), an e-commerce platform that has features facilitating social interaction (like Taobao and Pinduoduo), information exchange and lastly, a fusion of these two types. A slightly different typology was proposed by scholars in Chinese-language literature in order to illustrate the platforms specific for the Chinese context. Sun and Zhang (2017) distinguished between social platforms that passively generate a consumption demand through social interactions and USG (like Weibo, WeChat and Douyin), e-commerce platforms that use social features to enhance user stickiness (like Taobao and Pinduoduo) and lastly, new platforms that keep up with the newest trends and attract a large number of users (like Xiaohongshu).

Even though both categorizations can be applied to the platforms that were studied in this paper, the analysis in our research was based on three platform types derived from secondary data and primary data from interviews and focus groups with Chinese consumers. A different method to analyse social commerce platform in China has been chosen due to the main aim of this research to uncover and better understand the social commerce phenomenon and the consumer journey in social commerce. Previous scholars, like Sun and Zhang (2017), have developed different types and categorizations with the main goal to gain a comprehensive understanding of their business models and social commerce development that lacked the consumer perspective. As noticed previously by Zhou et al. (2013), the previous understanding of the SC phenomenon did not reflect its complexity. Compared to previous studies, the three types of platforms that emerged from the analysis of collected data in this study: relationship-based, content-based and transaction-based platforms, helped to extend our understanding of multi-channelling behaviour in social commerce and comprehend how different platform types are associated with different activities of its users. The activities associated with different platform stages are closely related to the platform-types distinguished in the platform analysis of this thesis. The buying stage can be associated with transaction-based platforms, while the advertisement and engagement stages show resemblance with the content and relationship-based type platforms. Nevertheless, on closer inspection, several differences can be noticed. For instance, according to collected information on consumers, Xiaohongshu was associated with every stage, including the buying stage. Nevertheless, based on the secondary data collected on the platform, it does not possess strong characteristics of a transaction-based type platform as for instance pre- and post-purchase incentives that encourage users to complete the transaction on this platform. Only recently, Xiaohongshu implemented advertisements with direct shopping links that increase transaction convenience, one of the characteristics of transaction-based platforms (Chanpindaguan, 2018). Similarly, Taobao was placed by interviewed consumers at the engagement and buying stage, while it was categorized as content- and transaction-based platform. The difference stems from the fact that, as admitted by focus group participants themselves, social interaction activities are not so strong on this platform and engagement stage on Taobao reported by consumers only refers to mainly reviewing and writing comments. Yet, our platform analysis has revealed that all studied platforms try to implement all different functions. They constantly develop new features in order to stay competitive and relevant for their users. In addition, it also appears that platforms are unlikely to open for cooperation with others at any time in the near future. That assumption is based on common practices of platforms blocking their competitors in China. Alibaba marketplaces like Taobao are not allowed to enter the WeChat ecosystem through mini-programs. Similarly, official WeChat accounts and WeChat users cannot easily share listings from Alibaba platforms with their friends on WeChat. Douyin short-video platform users are not allowed to share links to Douyin with their WeChat friends since WeChat has blocked API connection with the platform (Durarenok, 2018). Besides, based on our findings, it can be quickly noticed that bigger platforms also develop their own ingrained payment systems, like Alibaba with Alipay and WeChat with WeChat Pay. While smaller players, like Xiaohongshu and Pinduoduo, function as mini-programs within WeChat and allow users to use WeChat Pay and Alipay for payments, they also put continuous efforts into improving their features. As indicated by the interviewed Xiaohongshu's employee, the platform is currently trying to target more male consumers, while Pinduoduo was found to implement new functions to fight counterfeits and help consumers find listings of the legitimate brands on its platform (Soo, 2018b).

This specific social commerce landscape in China shows differences with previous research conducted on social commerce platforms. Huang and Benyoucef (2013) and later Han and Trimi (2017) both claimed that it is not necessary for platforms to achieve all features within their respective components as long as they cover all components. Nevertheless, the results of our research imply that due to harsh competition on the Chinese market, disregarding certain features might mean a certain loss for a platform engaging in social commerce in China.

6.3 How to enter the golden middle of SC? Suggestions for Platforms.

As shown in the platform framework (Appendix 10) that was used for the assessment of platforms, Taobao has all the examined features and it can be noticed that the platform's development is oriented toward the centre of the Venn diagram that was presented in the platform analysis section. As Taobao is originally an e-commerce platform, although it has already implemented various features that refer to the engagement and advertising stages, it is still improving the engagement and advertisement elements on the platform. The other platforms also possess features or recently implemented new features that are not commonly adapted and used by consumers, as was revealed in the interviewing process, for instance commercial features that enable to accomplish transactions on Douyin or Weibo. How can these platforms enter the golden middle of social commerce, namely the centre of Venn diagram? General suggestions based on our research, which every platform should take into consideration, are presented in the following section.

Establish credibility system and platform reputation

Credibility has been mentioned multiple times by consumers and brands. Because of the number of different platforms to choose from, consumers have also admitted that trust to a platform can be easily broken if encountered with counterfeit products or unfavourable experience. Therefore, platforms' trustworthy reputation, credibility or reliability system that supports brand holders and consumers and assures their protection were the most valued aspects of platforms in our interviews. For these reasons, since the tolerance towards bad quality or fake products of the Chinese consumers is very low and it is hard to earn their trust, the platforms should implement a thorough quality verification system. Platforms reliability was named to be more important than the buyer-seller relationship when it comes to resolving any problems related to transaction or the product itself. Therefore, every product being sold on the platform should be examined carefully before shipped out to consumers. As one of the respondents indicated, most of the big brands have brand protection actions, which help the brands to filter counterfeit, trademark infringement or other kinds of taking unfair advantage of a well-known brand's reputation. Therefore, it is also reasonable that social commerce platforms offer the quality verification or brand protection services to stakeholders as well as a blocking system of fake deals and machine-generated feedback, in order to increase the stickiness of the customers of the platform. On top of that, since consumer-related findings revealed that consumers are sensitive towards sponsored content, it may be advisable to clearly mark sponsored content for the users.

Most credible platforms that were pointed out included across focus groups, but also in the interviews with the market experts were Xiaohongshu and Tmall. Whereas, platforms with the least credibility that were mostly associated with counterfeit products included Taobao and Pinduoduo. Since both Taobao and Pinduoduo are transaction-based platforms, these suggestions apply especially to this type and platforms appearing at the advertisement and buying stages.

Collaborate with brands and KOLs

Besides already mentioned collaboration between brand holders and platforms in detecting and preventing sales of counterfeit products, platforms that collaborate with KOLs like Xiaohongshu were also perceived more positively. Consumers showed more favourable attitudes toward KOLs launched by big platforms than other influencers. This finding implies that platforms should pay more attention towards influencers on their own platform and start collaboration with popular Wanghongs who create appealing content for users. Building a base of a platform's own influencers might improve the platform's reputation with regards to quality content and as a result, also users' stickiness with the platform. What's more, as both consumers themselves and market experts recognized the problem of brands working with Wanghongs that do not fit their image, platforms can also connect their own influencers with relevant brands to improve the advertising efficiency. In addition, another aspect worth mentioning is the use of big data on consumers. As mentioned before, Xiaohongshu is a platform that uses the information on the most searched products and establishes a cooperation with relevant brands to fit the demands of its users. Because some of the consumers participating in the focus group admitted sticking to the platform where their favourite brands or shops can be found, this is an important aspect that shall be considered by platforms, especially the ones that belong to the relationship-based and transaction-based types and appear at the advertising and engagement stages. Collaboration between platforms, KOLs and brands seem to create a win-win situation for all parties by enhancing user stickiness with the platform thanks to the quality content, relevant KOLs and brands, as well as potentially better advertising efficiency and conversion rate for brands due to the ability to stay closer to the target consumers and collect accurate information on consumer behaviours and preferences.

Use technology to design the consumer journey

Platforms have benefited from the development of the telecom technology and the rapid improvement of mobile phones. Customers can now access all kinds of platforms in a significantly more convenient way. Looking at the platform types illustrated by the Venn Diagram (Figure 20), Douyin and Xiaohongshu both belong to the content-based type platforms and they both are relatively new platforms, launched in 2016 and 2013 respectively. Seen from our secondary data collection, Douyin and Xiaohongshu are both very successful in attracting traffic and the fast speed of gaining their customer base shows that new ways of presenting products and attracting traffic - be it photos, video content or live streams - might be an important channel for creating awareness for some brands despite different opinions on these platforms shared by our interviewees. One important function of

Douyin and Xiaohongshu is that on both of them video contents can be easily shared with others. Compared to traditional ways of advertising such as an advertising campaigns made by media companies, short videos have shorter production cycle and lower production costs. In addition, they also contain the social attributes allowing users to communicate and interact with the community, sellers or KOLs.

Besides, according to the consumer interviews, although consumers do not fancy advertisements, they do not mind content that is accurately customized. Therefore, to improve the technology aspect of the consumer journey, including the improvement of proactive personalization and contextual interaction could be suggested to the platforms that have not done so yet. All platforms should consider the improvement of the technology aspect of the consumer journey and the four capabilities that support the whole journey advised previously by Edelman and Singer (2015). While our platform's assessment based on Han and Trimi's framework (2017) has shown that six platforms studied in this paper have most of features associated with these four capabilities, there are few noticeable differences among them. The machine learning and big data that support two of the capabilities, proactive personalization and contextual interaction are not fully utilized by Weibo and WeChat, unlike the other platforms analysed in this paper. Proactive personalization and contextual interaction allow to make use of the information collected about consumer's past behaviour and decisions to optimize and suggest the content and steps one is likely to follow.

Last but not least, it became evident that the transaction-based type platforms that can be distinguished from others due to their features supporting transaction convenience, providing pre-purchase and post-purchase transaction incentives, are also the ones associated the most with the buying stage in the consumer journey. Therefore, it appears that other platform types, relationship and content-based platforms should pay attention to increase payment security and convenience and to improve "pulling weeds" (拔草) functions like the direct shopping links or in-app shops as well as implement additional benefits from purchasing on the platform as red pockets and coupons. This could encourage users to complete their purchases without switching to other channels at the buying stage.

6.4 Building brand awareness and trust: Suggestions for brands

Combining the points made by consumers and market experts, we realized how important it is to create brands' awareness and to build trust among the consumers. Based on our findings and analysis, we conclude with several suggestions for brands, especially for brands that have no or little recognition in China but want to enter the Chinese market.

Utilize the right platforms

Based on the focus group interviews, which platforms the brand use can affect a customer's attitude towards the brand. As said by market expert from BingBang, on a right platform the brand company can meet the right consumer. This opinion has also been supported by NihaoCPH: Brands need to figure out their positioning very well, in order to have their target consumer segment engaged. Every platform has different functions which are attractive to certain user segment. After acquiring a comprehensive understanding about different characteristics of platforms, brands shall know if it is appropriate to use a certain platform to help them get access to their target consumer segment. Therefore, we suggest that the brands, especially the small or medium-sized ones, to utilize relationship-based and content-based platforms. Because of the social commerce features of these two types of platforms, brands can access the consumers easily compared to on transaction-based platforms, since on relationship-based and content-based platforms, the brands can benefit from the consumer networks and technical aspect, to approach the correct customer segment, and build brand awareness. For instance, on Xiaohongshu or Weibo, the brand only needs to create a post to attract consumers' eyeballs. On Taobao, on the other side, since there are so many listings, small brands need to have some paid advertisement to make their products be seen. Besides, according to the customers interviews, friends, family and strong ties' recommendations are trusted. Hence, another benefit for small brands to make use of relationship-based platforms such as WeChat, the products by the brands are more easily to be trusted and accepted. And for large brands, who already built the awareness in Chinese market, shall make use of transaction-based platforms like Taobao and Pinduoduo, make use of the group-buying and live-streaming functions, and benefit from their efficient payment methods to increase sales.

Smartly employ Wanghong

Although Wanghong is a huge trend today, from the part of findings and analysis we have found out Wanghong is not always the best solution for brands when it comes to building brand presence or marketing new products. From the consumers' perspective, comparing to close friends' recommendations and comments and reviews of certain products made by common people, Wanghong is the least effective component when it comes to affecting consumer buying decisions. However, some of the interview participants expressed that they have their own favoured and trusted Wanghong and would follow the recommendations made by those Wanghong. Although, the interviewees agreed that they would like to see those sponsored posts clarified as "sponsored", otherwise they feel like being spammed with "fake" information. While at the same time, from the interviews from the brand side who tried to market through Wanghong, the Wanghong market was seen as a "jungle", due to the fact that they are usually "overpriced", and their conversion rates are hard to monitor. Thus, it is vital for brands to avoid ineffective investment. In such case, we suggest that the brands who do not have enough funds to avoid going into that field, since Wanghong promotions, especially the ones conducted by big influencers that were verified by platforms "大 V" are quite expensive and as shown in our interviews, consumers nowadays do not have much credit for them. Investment in micro influencer campaigns or 小 V which are Wanghong who do not have as many followers as 大 V is a better way to approach customers. "小 V" usually are common users on the platform, and these common users become Wanghong because their customized content is often informative, interesting or entertaining, and hence more trusted by consumers as was also indicated by our focus group participants. Additionally, according to the interviewed market experts, the price of "小 V" is cheaper than "大 V". Therefore, for brands who have sufficient funds, they can choose "大 V" or even celebrities, who have a high number of followers and are experienced with advertising and sale products.

Overall, despite the funds that the brands have, there are some suggestions for all the brands who want to employ Wanghong to expand the market. First of all, give clear indication to sponsored posts, let the Wanghong clarify that this post is sponsored to gain consumer trust. Secondly, choose Wanghong whose followers are the correct customer segment and can represent the brand image. Thirdly, make sure to conduct research on the Wanghong to be employed, e.g. check on the comments below their posts, make sure that the person has the ability to engage their followers.

Take advantage of technology and build a bridge between online and offline

Interviews with market experts and consumers revealed that it is important for brands to be present both online and offline. We suggest that brands make good use of digital tools like QRcodes, by which customers can scan a code offline and follow a brand's online campaigns and activities as well as mini programs, which can help the customers ease the process of purchase by ordering online and picking up offline. By using the digital tools, the brands can make smooth connections between their online and offline services, thereby improving customer experience and preventing consumers from switching to other alternatives.

6.5 Is Social Commerce in China the next chapter of e-commerce?

Our results indicate that in line with marketers and other scholars' speculations the emergence of social commerce is likely to greatly influence the way consumers are shopping online in the future. That also means changes for other participants of the phenomena like platforms and brands. Already now we can see changes in behaviors and attitudes of consumers reflected in the efforts of platforms to adapt to changing demands, needs and expectations of their users. Besides, similar observations have been made from the interviews with market experts, who expressed increasing difficulties in selecting the right platforms to reach their target consumer segments or brand representatives who can recreate their accurate brand image.

This research was focused specifically on the Chinese market and the uniqueness of the Chinese context in regard to social commerce phenomena is unquestionable. Not only different online platforms, but also the willingness of Chinese consumers to shop online or adapt newest technologies and innovations is differencing this context from the others. China leads the race in the number of online shoppers throughout the world today. Following the popularity of e-commerce and social commerce, many local platforms are joining the fierce competition to win the biggest share of the pie, meaning that they develop different features in order to keep users on their platforms and prevent them from switching to competitors. That is also why, as indicated by Durarenok (2018), Chinese platforms are unlikely to open for cooperation with others at any time in the near future, as f.eg. Alibaba marketplaces like Taobao are not allowed to enter the WeChat ecosystem through mini-programs and official WeChat accounts and WeChat users cannot easily share listings from Alibaba platforms with their friends on WeChat. These specific characteristics of Chinese context, together with the other unique characteristics, shape the social commerce landscape in the country and differentiate it from Western counterparts. Yet, without a doubt, social commerce is also growing in the West. Latest study conducted by GfK (2018) indicated that in comparison to numbers from 2015, more and more US internet users are willing to use mobiles for online shopping and transactions as social networks for information gathering. It is therefore an interesting trend that requires further investigation when it comes to other contexts.

6.6 Limitations and Future Implications

According to James (2004), limitations to the study's design can denote systematic researcher bias, which can influence results. Those researchers who fail to reference enough limitations in the research may cause subsequent researchers to accord this work with more credit than it is due (James, 2004). Although researchers should attempt to minimize bias, outlining potential sources of bias enables greater critical evaluation of the research findings and conclusions (Smith & Noble, 2017). This section takes a reflective approach to review limitations within this research, which mainly exists with the collection of primary data.

In terms of evaluating the contact with empirical material, it should be clarified how "raw" data is collected and handled. This is related to what we do with the sample that was selected and the data that was collected. The samples in primary data collection chosen by the researchers might be limited because the correct category of respondents cannot be accessed, for example due to geographical restrictions. In our research, we sent interview invitations to as many Chinese participants as possible and selected the ten most suitable focus group participants to decrease bias in regard to gender, occupation, age and origin. However, due to geographical limitations, we only sent our interview invitations to Chinese people who live in Denmark. Most of the focus group participants are university students, as they are easier to reach out to in our network. Having more students in the focus groups may create a bias, as Chinese university students enrolling in Danish universities arguably share a similar purchasing power. Due to time and geographical constraints, most of the participants shared similar backgrounds. What is more, during the focus group interviews, the group discussions were difficult to steer and control. Hence, some discussions were driven to irrelevant topics. We also found that at the beginning of the interviews, the participants were cautious in terms of giving their thoughts to the topic possibly due to shyness, which might have resulted in them not voicing their full opinions. Moreover, during focus group interviews, some of the interviewees' voices might have been influenced by other participants' answers, i.e. when the prior answer includes topics irrelevant to the question or sound more convincing - due to the speaker's profession, age, personality or other factors - the subsequent answers might be affected. For instance, in our focus group interviews, we asked about the participants' views on Wanghongs. In focus group one, the first answer was negative, and the emphasis was not on the phenomenon of Wanghong, and the others agreed with that view, and the following discussion became emphasizing on another topic. Consequently, it is impossible to guarantee that the actual voice of all the participants is accurately reflected. Lastly, our moderators' skill in phrasing questions, if we asked the question with an unconscious indicative intonation, along with the room setting where the focus group interviews took place, might have affected the atmosphere and responses.

In terms of the interpretive process through which more profound meaning is drawn from data, i.e. the data analysis process, since we studied secondary information on the platforms, and have been using the platforms ourselves, we might have a pre-perception and pre-conception on each of the platforms, which could affect the choice of themes from the interview transcripts when conducting data analysis.

Based on the discussions of the findings, of the analysis part and the limitations, implications for future research has been identified:

1. In the background section of this research, the New E-commerce Law, carried out 1st of January 2019, has been introduced. This encompasses regulations that aim to protect the consumer's rights, including protecting customer data and reducing counterfeits. Ideally, it may ease the trust problems among the Chinese consumers. However, since the law is relatively new, it takes time to see the influences on consumer behaviour. The future research could be done on how the New E-commerce Law has affected the credibility of online activities and social commerce.

2. Shown by our customer interviews, people have different decision-making process or customer journey for different kind of products, which might also be influenced by the participants' background. Therefore, we suggest that future research investigates the relations between different consumers and product types and how brands can sell different types of products by targeting various types of customers.

3. During our focus group interview, the impact of education and income on consumer behaviour and the psychology behind the behaviour was mentioned when discussing influencers. It has been implied that rich people are less averse to Wanghong's recommendations, while poor people are usually disliking it. Therefore, it is also a topic worth further investigation.

7. Conclusions

Social commerce in China has gained a lot of attention in recent years and there are various market players who want to exploit the opportunities it comes with. The aim of this study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of social commerce in China. In order to reach this objective, we started by researching previous literature that has studied different perspectives on social commerce. Thereafter, based on previous scholars' research, multiple aspects covered by social commerce and current situation in China, we presented our own definition of social commerce that guided this paper: *Social commerce refers to exchange-related activities that occur in, or are influenced by, an individual's social network and relationships formed on online platforms* (after Yadav et al., 2013 and Yajing Diao et al., 2019). This definition presents an omnichannel understanding of the consumer journey and experience in social commerce in China where the social network and relationships alongside online activities play crucial roles. Whereas the consumer is a dominant component of social networks and relationships. Different from traditional customer journey of e-commerce, which happens on a single channel, we discovered that consumers in social commerce follow multi-channel journey where social aspects also have a huge impact, such as social networks and Guanxi, the role of influencers, the power of word of mouth and trust.

It became evident that social commerce in China is reshaping the whole scene of online shopping experiences and it is opening the door to the next chapter of e-commerce, where social and collaborative interactions are crucial part of the purchasing journey. From the consumer-perspective, social commerce has created additional values during shopping, thanks to enhanced engagement and interactions with other consumers, brands and brand representatives. The availability and convenience of collecting and exchanging information online through a wide range of channels and touchpoints lead consumers to become more empowered and enables them to make more informed purchasing decisions. Taking the importance of trust-building in every aspect of life in China, including interpersonal and business relationships, social commerce platforms provide a good foundation for this process by enabling easy information sharing and interaction.

For platforms, we collected secondary data about six big players in Chinese social commerce. Furthermore, we analysed the selected platforms through the framework developed by Han and Trimi (2017). Based on different functions of this framework, selected platforms were divided into three types of social commerce. However, we have found out that according to the platform performance assessment, every selected platform does not only belong to one type since all of them are improving their functions and trying to get in the middle of the circle, meaning they try to cover all three types of social commerce and possess all kinds of functions. We have discovered that every platform has its specific role in the consumer journey that shapes the overall experience. Yet, although platforms develop different features, different consumer segments shop differently, therefore different features might be used by different consumers at different stages. The most notable feature of social commerce is that the social-related exchange activities of the platforms can support customers' buying decision, create brand awareness, and help in post-purchase services and reviews-sharing. The highly interactive purchase behaviour not only enhances the loyalty of users to certain platforms but also improves existing and new users' retention. Besides, consumers become more loyal to certain platforms not only due to their reputation, own positive experiences and presence of their friends on the platform, but also interesting content that is being recommended to them and the presence of their favourite opinion leaders and brands. These factors can stimulate the purchase behaviour and boost the shopping stickiness.

Although the CEO of NihaoCPH suggested that social commerce in China should not be seen as a new concept, as it has been present for a long time offline, our research indicates that this phenomenon expands and reshapes the whole market scene for all participants, customers, brands and platforms. Based on our findings, we provided practical suggestions for brands which are trying to enter the Chinese market and successfully engage in social commerce as well as the platforms that want to exploit the market opportunities that social commerce brings to light. Our research results indicated that social commerce is the future of e-commerce, and it has huge potential. Even though Chinese consumers are nowadays spoiled with too many choices and they do not easily trust platforms and brands, once they build a trustful relationship, it is not easily broken. Once one is past the initial trust building stage, the recent changes in the regulatory environment and promising technological developments are likely to change the future of online shopping in China irreversibly. Although many scholars argue that social commerce has not reached its full potential to transform the online shopping scene (Yajing Diao et al., 2019), China is without a doubt the bellwether, providing inspiring clues about how social commerce is likely to develop around the globe.

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Table of Appendices

Appendix 1: Semi-structured Interview Guide with market experts

Length: 30-60 minutes
Target: Experts who have experiences selling products to China on social commerce platforms
Primary goal: To learn and understand what market experts' experiences with social commerce in China are.

Introduction:
1. Introduce ourselves, our research and goals.
2. Ask for permission to record the interview.

Introductory questions:
- Ask the interviewee to briefly tell us about him/herself and the company: general information, background (specific questions vary depending on the company or market expert being interviewed).

Main questions:
The sequence of questions differs depending on the flow of conversation and specific follow-up questions are asked were answers appear unclear.

1. How do you understand social commerce? /What is social commerce to you?
2. What platforms have you used to sell products?
3. How were your experiences selling through mentioned platforms?
4. How do you attract followers?
5. How were your experiences up to date with livestreams? If you had any?
6. How were your experiences with KOLs/influencers in China so far, if had any?
7. What challenges have you faced on Chinese market?
8. Follow-up questions based on their answers.

Closing question:
1. Is there something that we haven't asked but you think is worth mentioning?

Appendix 2: Semi-structured Interview Guide with individual interviewees

Length: 30-40 minutes
Target: Chinese customers who have experiences of shopping online in China
Primary goal: To investigate user's experience and behaviors with social commerce.

Introduction:
1. Introduce ourselves, our research and goals.
2. Ask for permission to record the interview.

Background information:

- Ask the interviewee to briefly introduce him/herself.

Main questions:

The sequence of questions differs depending on the flow of conversation and specific follow-up questions are asked were answers appear unclear.

1. What is your understanding towards SC?
2. What Chinese SC platforms did/do you use?
3. Why you choose certain platforms?
4. Could you share your shopping experiences on SC platforms in China?
5. Do you often interact with other users online, esp. while shopping or looking for products?
6. Would you purchase the products recommended by KOLs?
7. Do you think that is a sustainable business model for SC that turn the users' traffic to the marketability?
8. What do you think about other users' opinions that can be found on social commerce platforms?
9. Could you share your shopping experience last time online?
10. What is your impression of social commerce?

Closing question:

1. Is there something that we haven't asked but you think is worth mentioning?

Appendix 3: Focus Group Interview Guide

Participants:

- 4-5 people in a focus group
- One moderator and 2 assistants

Environment:

- comfortable, round sitting arrangement with refreshments, recording on the side
- the whole focus group interview is conducted in Chinese

Outline of discussion:

1. Moderator introduces herself along with assistants
2. The research objective, process of discussion and focus group guidelines are explained to the participants. Participants are encouraged to voice their opinions and actively discuss with others. They are also notified that there are no wrong answers. Later, all upcoming questions about the interviewing process are answered. In the end, participants are asked for permission to record the discussion.

3. The focus group discussion starts with an opening question:
   "Please share your latest shopping experience (what did you shop for and which platforms did you use)?"

Questions for discussion

The following questions are asked in a varying sequence to ensure that they follow the natural flow of discussion.

1. Have you ever heard of the term social commerce? What does it mean to you?
2. Which platforms do you associate with social commerce/ Which social commerce platforms do you usually use?
3. Why do you choose these platforms?
4. Are you an active person who is willing to give feedback after purchase and interact with others on those platforms?
5. How do you feel about the advertisements on social media platforms?
6. Is there any product that you will never buy on social media platforms/online?
7. Do you trust the platforms you choose for shopping?
8. Have you ever paid attention to Wanghong? Are there any Wanghongs you follow?
9. From your opinion, is social commerce a sustainable business model in China?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share but did not have a chance to? Do you think there are any other important questions that we did not ask?

Appendix 4: Focus group 1 - transcript

Participants：Xuemin (no.1.1), Lulu (no.1.2), Sophia (np.1.3), Zhuo Chen (1.4).

今天要聊得主题是 sc，什么是 sc，就是社交电商。
1.4：小红书
1.3：抖音也是
1.1：就是可以分享经验互相交流

你们通常会用哪些电商进行购物？
All: 淘宝
1.2：亚马逊
1.2: 京东

为什么要选择这些电商呢？
1.1: 因为商品多，商家多，可以进行比价 然后发货速度快 售后有保证, 随时随地找客服沟通。
还有哪些呢？
1.4:就是这边还有一些网站之类的

1.1: 但是我们这次是聚焦国内哦

你们有在电商平台上买到假货吗？
1.1:当然啦，但是目前假货也是越来越少了，像那些大品牌也有很多打假的措施。它们一般会有那些三包政策，还有那些正品的认证渠道。

大家回忆一下上一次在国内的网上购物经历。
1.1:我今年回国的时候在国内用 京东买了一些电子产品。
Follow-up 为什么要用京东买电子产品而不是用淘宝？
1.1：因为京东和淘宝相比他们对电子产品的描述和对商家的管控都比较严格。然后他们还有些上面服务，比如京东物流。还有售后，在京东上面购买电子产品，那些组装电脑什么的。这些在淘宝上是没有的。
1.4：目前淘宝的天猫上面也有。
1.2：我最近是在天猫超市购买了食物，泡面。
Followup：为什么会选择在天猫超市购买？
因为淘宝假货比较多嘛。关键是只有京东在春节的时候发货，其他的都不能。
1.2:但是有些天猫淘宝用顺丰也是可以发的。但是有时间限制，但是京东完全没有。
1.4: 最近有在天猫超市上面购买过食品和零食，觉得天猫超市上面的货品都有质量保障。

为什么会选择从天猫超市上购买而不是从淘宝上购买？
1.2：因为淘宝大多都是个体户所以就造就了假货比较多，而天猫是比较有保障的而且发货也快当天就发。
1.3：我最近一次网购是在淘宝上买的。一个独立设计师品牌店的服装，因为现在有很多年轻的设计师为了争夺这个市场。他们也会通过网络平台来推广自己的产品，那么淘宝相对他们于建立自己的平台会接触到更多的客户。还有一些价格比较昂贵首饰比如单价 3000 左右的，我不能接受这个价格，在淘宝上是可以买到高仿便宜的，价格大概在 100 到 200。
1.4: 我最近一次是在淘宝上帮我妈买了花架，因为她不追求品牌嘛，所以我只看销量，排名，选择看起来质量不错的。还有我觉得在淘宝上有很多选择，你可以从中选出性价比比较高一点的无品牌产品。
1.1：我觉得要对京东补充一点，我发现在京东上面有很多一些用户会对很多商品进行评测。这些人可能是社会责任感很强的一些博主，在用过之后能对产品进行很客观的评测。
1.3：那些人可能是拿钱写的评论。
1.1 那我不管，只要他在平台上写评论也是吸引用户的。
1.3：我觉得最后决定消费者选择的是价格。那些测评对于我来说我可以通过其他渠道去了解，最后我还是四处比价。淘宝上面也有打假措施，关键还是价格。
1.1：但是我觉得主流的产品各电商之间的价格都差不多，一般不会超过 100。要是差的多的话可能是进货渠道的问题，一般我还会关注哪个电商平台有什么活动。优惠活动会很吸引我。
1.3：我现在其实只会看那些差评，因为好评其实都没什么用，只有差评才是真实的客户评价。

1.1：现在其实最好是看评论数量，相较于那些评论数过万的就说明了有大量的人在购买。我会更倾向于购买评论多的。也可以通过这点辨别出产品的好坏。

你们会因为什么产生购买欲望？
1.2: 一般都是自己想要了才会去买吧。然后会去看一些评测。
1.1: 我是看商家的促销信息，可能你注册了他们的客户。他们会定时的发给你们一些活动信息。
1.3: 我主要有 2 点，1 点事注册客户收邮件，另一种就是会收藏店铺。
Follow-up 你们说的这些产品是哪些产品？
1.3: 衣服我是不会再电商进行购买的，就是用户体验比较高的我还是会更倾向去实体店。
1.4: 我觉得我是那种理性消费者，我会关注一些微信公众号。微博推得文章我也会看。

你们平常会在小红书上面买东西吗？
1.4: 我最早是大学时期在小红书上面有买过，那时候很早，还没有网红、化妆品那些， 我就买过零食，据说他们的创始人是想把全世界的好东西分享给所以客户。那时候还有很多折扣，价格比较低。
Follow-up 你觉得在小红书上面会买到假货吗？
1.4：我已开始有质疑，但是就想买回来试一下。它有各种清关的信息。
1.3：淘宝上面有很多产品，会把假的当真的卖，但是不告诉你。但是淘宝他们好的一点是会标出来告诉你，只是仿品，不是真的。
1.1：奢侈品为什么贵重在于生产他们用的时间够长纯手工打造，仿品因为都是生产线出来的时间段。

你们对微信，朋友圈，微博那些平台弹出来的广告有什么感觉？
1.4：很烦，对 ins 上的广告不是很排斥，推荐的都好像我关注的内容。
1.1：那你要当心，那上面的广告也有可能是假的。
1.3：我会感觉到我的隐私被侵犯了。
1.4：有些广告是逼着你在看，就很烦。

你们在电商上面买到假的会进行维权吗？
1.3：我知道它是假的呀
1.1：她就要买假的
1.2：不会在电商买大品牌的东西，就是觉得电商的假货概率太高才只买一些便宜的东西，真正一些好东西还是会去实体店购买。
1.4：而且大品牌在电商上的价格不会跟实体店差很多，所以还不如去实体店买。

那你们在电商上是那种很活跃的用户吗？比如说买完会不会去评论进行互动？
1.3: 哈哈哈 猥琐的笑了...... 我一般只会对那些 假货做的很好 才会对他们进行褒奖和鼓励。
1.1：其实我倒没买到过假货，但是有买到过于图片上不同的产品。当然也会要求退货。

你们对网红和明星推荐的产品有什么看法？

1.3：你得看是谁在推荐，比如说张柏芝明显就是托。收了钱打广告的这种我会比较慎重。只有那些广大群众推荐的产品我会比较信任一点。但是看到那种明星自己在用的就比较相信。
1.4：但是我可能没法分别谁是托谁不是托，50%相信，更相信广大人民群众的评论。
1.1：比如说负面的信息大家会比较相信点。比如说某博主说这个这个千万不能用，这样大家会比较相信。
All：对耶，就是好事不出门，坏事传千里

你们对在社交网站上弹出来的广告有什么意见吗？
1.4：很烦
1.3:是那些社交 app 可以获取你们的 gps 信息。通过 gps 可以知道你一天的行踪，经常到访过哪里。根据这些就可以给你推一些有关的产品。
1.3 : 其实我不排斥那些推崇的广告，因为那些推崇的广告大多都是我想要的。但是我是不知道其中的缘由的，我现在知道了觉得这样不太好，我感觉隐私受到了侵犯。
1.1:网上很多广告还是强制给你看的。没办法很烦。
1.4: 现在还有很多海外代购，很恐怖。连收据都能做假。
1.3: 这年头那种现场直播购物的都能是假的，人工搭建出临时店铺进行虚假现场。

你们有没有什么经历就是完全没有经过观看评论就直接购买的？
1.4：这种应该是那种信得过的品牌才会这样。
1.2：天猫超市也会，调好了直接买，消耗品日用品 。
1.3：拼多多和聚美优品都是假货聚集地。
1.1: 对，他们好像都是被淘宝清除出去的三无厂家都会被他们接收。

天猫官网上的化妆品旗舰店你们进吗？
1.2: 不进，因为之前爆出过假货，之后就不会再去了。而且一个品牌可能有好多个旗舰店。
1.4: 是啊，只要你出假以后大家就不信任了呢。
1.1：现在每个商家每年可以自己删除一到两个差评，我觉得这个不错，很人性。

你们在抖音上买过东西吗？
1.4：没有买过，感觉主要是做视频的。主要用来娱乐
1.1：从它的主要功能来看，它主要是做视频的，购物是附带。上面的网红我觉得他们的信誉度并不高，偏娱乐性。

你们对于宣传的方式以视频的方式，图片的方式还是以文字的方式，哪个对你们接受度比较高？
1.3: 我会更倾向于文字和图片的结合。因为视频可能更多的是直播，这样会占用我大量的时间。图片和文字我可以在我空余时间随时进行了解。

你们对于这些广告的流量会不会太在意？
All：不会，这年头流量都用不完。

在什么情况下你们会对某个商家进行屏蔽和拉黑呢？
大多数女孩表示没有过这种经历。
All: 取消关注的话，对购物的体验不佳的时候吧。或者如果对一个店铺的喜爱程度不够的时候你又推送很多消息，就会取消关注。

那你们平常在网购的时候会不会进行分享？
1.3：碰到一些好用的东西还是会分享给可能有需要的朋友。或者知道那个朋友正好需要什么，我又正好在小红书或者什么平台上看到。

那分享的时候，都会通过什么平台分享？
1.3：一般都是用微信分享，因为一般这种购买都在手机上进行，而大家的交流渠道都是 WeChat 所以一般都回到微信上分享。

你们生命中有没有一个人向你们推荐一种产品你一定会买？
1.3：要是他推荐的东西在我的购买意向中的我会，不然我会考虑一下的。
1.4：最好他的推荐能对我产生一定的影响，但是我会采纳一下他的意见。
1.2： 我会至少看一下，再考虑一下或了解一下。因为我比较理性。

有什么东西你们是绝对不会在社交网络上购买的，尽管你们对店铺百分百信任？
1.3：大型家具类吧。
1.4：奢侈品不会。
1.2：奢侈品

会在微信小程序上购买吗？
1.2：小程序是什么？
就是不需要下载软件的 app，直接通过微信购买。
1.3：我买过喜茶，还有小黄车。很方便。

Appendix 5: Focus group 2 - transcript

Participants: Qiao (no.2.1)，Cai(no.2.2)，Guo(no.2.3)，Dong(no.2.4)，Zhang(no.2.5)，Chen(no.2.6)

今天要聊得主题是 sc，什么是 sc，就是社交电商。
1.4：小红书
1.3：抖音也是
1.1：就是可以分享经验互相交流

你们通常会用哪些电商进行购物？
All: 淘宝
1.2：亚马逊

1.2: 京东

为什么要选择这些电商呢？
1.1: 因为商品多，商家多，可以进行比价 然后发货速度快 售后有保证, 随时随地找客服沟通。
还有哪些呢？
1.4:就是这边还有一些网站之类的
1.1: 但是我们这次是聚焦国内哦

你们有在电商平台上买到假货吗？
1.1:当然啦，但是目前假货也是越来越少了，像那些大品牌也有很多打假的措施。它们一般会有那些三包政策，还有那些正品的认证渠道。

大家回忆一下上一次在国内的网上购物经历。
1.1:我今年回国的时候在国内用 京东买了一些电子产品。
Follow-up 为什么要用京东买电子产品而不是用淘宝？
1.1：因为京东和淘宝相比他们对电子产品的描述和对商家的管控都比较严格。然后他们还有些上面服务，比如京东物流。还有售后，在京东上面购买电子产品，那些组装电脑什么的。这些在淘宝上是没有的。
1.4：目前淘宝的天猫上面也有。
1.2：我最近是在天猫超市购买了食物，泡面。
Followup：为什么会选择在天猫超市购买？
因为淘宝假货比较多嘛。关键是只有京东在春节的时候发货，其他的都不能。
1.2:但是有些天猫淘宝用顺丰也是可以发的。但是有时间限制，但是京东完全没有。
1.4: 最近有在天猫超市上面购买过食品和零食，觉得天猫超市上面的货品都有质量保障。

为什么会选择从天猫超市上购买而不是从淘宝上购买？
1.2：因为淘宝大多都是个体户所以就造就了假货比较多，而天猫是比较有保障的而且发货也快当天就发。
1.3：我最近一次网购是在淘宝上买的。一个独立设计师品牌店的服装，因为现在有很多年轻的设计师为了争夺这个市场。他们也会通过网络平台来推广自己的产品，那么淘宝相对他们于建立自己的平台会接触到更多的客户。还有一些价格比较昂贵首饰比如单价 3000 左右的，我不能接受这个价格，在淘宝上是可以买到高仿便宜的，价格大概在 100 到 200。
1.4: 我最近一次是在淘宝上帮我妈买了花架，因为她不追求品牌嘛，所以我只看销量，排名，选择看起来质量不错的。还有我觉得在淘宝上有很多选择，你可以从中选出性价比比较高一点的无品牌产品。
1.1：我觉得要对京东补充一点，我发现在京东上面有很多一些用户会对很多商品进行评测。这些人可能是社会责任感很强的一些博主，在用过之后能对产品进行很客观的评测。
1.3：那些人可能是拿钱写的评论。
1.1 那我不管，只要他在平台上写评论也是吸引用户的。

1.3：我觉得最后决定消费者选择的是价格。那些测评对于我来说我可以通过其他渠道去了解，最后我还是四处比价。淘宝上面也有打假措施，关键还是价格。
1.1：但是我觉得主流的产品各电商之间的价格都差不多，一般不会超过 100。要是差的多的话可能是进货渠道的问题，一般我还会关注哪个电商平台有什么活动。优惠活动会很吸引我。
1.3：我现在其实只会看那些差评，因为好评其实都没什么用，只有差评才是真实的客户评价。
1.1：现在其实最好是看评论数量，相较于那些评论数过万的就说明了有大量的人在购买。我会更倾向于购买评论多的。也可以通过这点辨别出产品的好坏。

你们会因为什么产生购买欲望？
1.2: 一般都是自己想要了才会去买吧。然后会去看一些评测。
1.1: 我是看商家的促销信息，可能你注册了他们的客户。他们会定时的发给你们一些活动信息。
1.3: 我主要有 2 点，1 点事注册客户收邮件，另一种就是会收藏店铺。
Follow-up 你们说的这些产品是哪些产品？
1.3: 衣服我是不会再电商进行购买的，就是用户体验比较高的我还是会更倾向去实体店。
1.4: 我觉得我是那种理性消费者，我会关注一些微信公众号。微博推得文章我也会看。

你们平常会在小红书上面买东西吗？
1.4: 我最早是大学时期在小红书上面有买过，那时候很早，还没有网红、化妆品那些， 我就买过零食，据说他们的创始人是想把全世界的好东西分享给所以客户。那时候还有很多折扣，价格比较低。
Follow-up 你觉得在小红书上面会买到假货吗？
1.4：我已开始有质疑，但是就想买回来试一下。它有各种清关的信息。
1.3：淘宝上面有很多产品，会把假的当真的卖，但是不告诉你。但是淘宝他们好的一点是会标出来告诉你，只是仿品，不是真的。
1.1：奢侈品为什么贵重在于生产他们用的时间够长纯手工打造，仿品因为都是生产线出来的时间段。

你们对微信，朋友圈，微博那些平台弹出来的广告有什么感觉？
1.4：很烦，对 ins 上的广告不是很排斥，推荐的都好像我关注的内容。
1.1：那你要当心，那上面的广告也有可能是假的。
1.3：我会感觉到我的隐私被侵犯了。
1.4：有些广告是逼着你在看，就很烦。

你们在电商上面买到假的会进行维权吗？
1.3：我知道它是假的呀
1.1：她就要买假的
1.2：不会在电商买大品牌的东西，就是觉得电商的假货概率太高才只买一些便宜的东西，真正一些好东西还是会去实体店购买。

1.4：而且大品牌在电商上的价格不会跟实体店差很多，所以还不如去实体店买。

那你们在电商上是那种很活跃的用户吗？比如说买完会不会去评论进行互动？
1.3: 哈哈哈 猥琐的笑了...... 我一般只会对那些 假货做的很好 才会对他们进行褒奖和鼓励。
1.1：其实我倒没买到过假货，但是有买到过于图片上不同的产品。当然也会要求退货。

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1.4：但是我可能没法分别谁是托谁不是托，50%相信，更相信广大人民群众的评论。
1.1：比如说负面的信息大家会比较相信点。比如说某博主说这个这个千万不能用，这样大家会比较相信。
All：对耶，就是好事不出门，坏事传千里

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你们有没有什么经历就是完全没有经过观看评论就直接购买的？
1.4：这种应该是那种信得过的品牌才会这样。
1.2：天猫超市也会，调好了直接买，消耗品日用品 。
1.3：拼多多和聚美优品都是假货聚集地。
1.1: 对，他们好像都是被淘宝清除出去的三无厂家都会被他们接收。

天猫官网上的化妆品旗舰店你们进吗？
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1.1：从它的主要功能来看，它主要是做视频的，购物是附带。上面的网红我觉得他们的信誉度并不高，偏娱乐性。

你们对于宣传的方式以视频的方式，图片的方式还是以文字的方式，哪个对你们接受度比较高？
1.3: 我会更倾向于文字和图片的结合。因为视频可能更多的是直播，这样会占用我大量的时间。图片和文字我可以在我空余时间随时进行了解。

你们对于这些广告的流量会不会太在意？
All：不会，这年头流量都用不完。

在什么情况下你们会对某个商家进行屏蔽和拉黑呢？
大多数女孩表示没有过这种经历。
All: 取消关注的话，对购物的体验不佳的时候吧。或者如果对一个店铺的喜爱程度不够的时候你又推送很多消息，就会取消关注。

那你们平常在网购的时候会不会进行分享？
1.3：碰到一些好用的东西还是会分享给可能有需要的朋友。或者知道那个朋友正好需要什么，我又正好在小红书或者什么平台上看到。

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1.3：一般都是用微信分享，因为一般这种购买都在手机上进行，而大家的交流渠道都是 WeChat 所以一般都回到微信上分享。

你们生命中有没有一个人向你们推荐一种产品你一定会买？
1.3：要是他推荐的东西在我的购买意向中的我会，不然我会考虑一下的。
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1.4：奢侈品不会。
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会在微信小程序上购买吗？
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就是不需要下载软件的 app，直接通过微信购买。
1.3：我买过喜茶，还有小黄车。很方便。

Appendix 6: Transcript of an interview with Rasmus Gregersen from NihaoCPH

Interviewer: Could you please start with a self-introduction?

Rasmus: We started sales on WeChat with some of furniture brands, because we do a lot of media marketing and then our readers were asking where we can buy it. And then we said we do not know and the brands we worked with said that we are not even selling in the Chinese market, so we set it up for them and sold products, you could say in collaboration with brands, so that we have access to the whole collection and then we take the color.

Interviewer: And how did it go, selling through WeChat?

Rasmus: It is though. It is like selling B2C is a though way of selling, I call it also social selling, because you have more trust in your friends, the way Chinese do, I think in general the way you shop is also that you get opinions from your friends around if this product, this coffee is good and we as a store should put that "this coffee is the best coffee", you will be like "hmm right". I will ask my friends if this coffee is good, so it is really difficult to sell B2C in general, but also if you do it in Chinese market and if you do in our example we did the furniture, which is like Danes have been growing up with design and furniture for a long time, so we have an opinion about it and some history about it. But how do you tell a person who have no interest in that, that this coffee is the best coffee, how, why, so the B2C market is really difficult.

Interviewer: Did you advertise your WeChat shop on other platforms? Did you use any other platforms to drive traffic? I have seen that you use Weibo more to share about life in CPH, but now a lot of furniture.

Rasmus: Yeah, we have Weibo. It has changed a lot since we started. Basically, in the beginning we focused on telling this restaurant is good, to now when it is being a lifestyle media, where tell about like lifestyle, but it does not have to be CPH or related to CPH, but the DNA of how Danish lifestyle is, is what we want to put on the Weibo account. And you can say that is our big voice, that's where we push out content. And then we have WeChat account and print-out magazine now, because it requires a lot to create all this content. If you need to push out a new content every day, because on WeChat especially you expect an article, so at least 2-3 people write an article every day and if it does not fit then you try another article and another article, it is a lot pushing pushing pushing. But on Weibo we can have another style, people can give us their opinion, interact.

So the magazine we started last summer, we have been talking a lot about it for a couple of years, going back to the old school, cause who does print physical magazines these days. We were more focused on digital marketing, but from feedback we got from brands, this is far from what they are used to do, if it is on Instagram or Facebook, they have no idea what is going on and they are not willing to pay, they can't understand what is going on. So we quite fast figured out that for quite a lot of brands it is difficult what is going on in the Chinese market, and if they have to pay 50 or 100 thousand for marketing campaign, that is quite a lot for mid-size or bigger company in DK. So last year before summer we figured out, we understand quite a lot of Chinese market and how to integrate it, and we set up a WeChat shop, so that you place an order, it will get packed, sent, we have set it all up. So we have good understanding how things work in China. And then we mentioned the magazine to brands, and they were really excited and asked how we can be in there. We did not have any experience in print-out magazine, but we jumped right into it.

Interviewer: So it was the brands that wanted to have the magazine, but you mentioned that brands also have no idea about Chinese context?

Rasmus: No, but the thing with the magazine, they have had the magazine in their hands before, they are used to the media. But if I tell them they should be on Weibo, they ask what is Weibo. With magazine even if they do not understand a word in Chinese, they can have it in their hands and see their products in the magazine. The way we do the advertising, everything we put in, is what we think is cool and we want to put in it. Every article has a QR code and you can scan it and get into the brands or their stories or whatever. But the marketing we do, if we have for example fashion or retail stores, we put their advertisements in there and then we would foil around the magazine and then sell it. Brands love that, cause they know it will go in the hands of Chinese customer. With digital marketing, all the likes and views, they have no way to cross-check what we are doing or what the market is doing. I think this is what scares most of them, whatever I pay you, you will make it look like success. With magazines, they know how many were shipped and sold and that it gets in the hands of consumer.

Interviewer: How is the selling in China for magazines?

Rasmus: We shipped out 1000 so far, we got request yesterday from 5 stores that want to sell magazine too, so the more we get it out, the more attention we get. There was actually a shop owner from Shanghai who wrote to us on Instagram that he wants the magazines.

Interviewer: Do you think they would be more successful if you could focus more on social media campaigns, like Weibo or other platforms?

Rasmus: Yeah, definitely. There is so much content online, especially on Chinese social media and also on Facebook. But if you do not hit the right trend or the right story, then it is gone. Like you have 5 seconds to catch viewer, right. A lot of posting and one time you hit it. Some posts we have 100 thousand views, the other 30 thousand. You can get lucky, post couple of posts, but you also need to be in the market and that is difficult for the brands. They have to allocate people to do that.

Interviewer: We also know from your website that you offer influencer campaigns; we would like to know more about how it works and what is your experience.

Rasmus: They have had a pretty big voice in the Chinese market over the last 5 years I would say. In case of selling to Chinese consumers you need to create trust even more than in Western markets, and the influencers are the channel for that to get attention of potential customers. And early on we started collaborating with influencers on lower level, because it can get quite expensive, and the more expensive it gets, the return is smaller, they are usually overpriced. If you take a bigger influencer, then it is probably a celebrity, and people are following her/him only because she is a celebrity. If you market cosmetics or skincare with beautiful celebrity or actor, half of their followers might be following because of their personality not looks, so it will maybe not be a right fit. But you may find someone who actually specializes in doing tutorials about fashion or skincare or cosmetics. What we started with our furniture brands, design brands, is working with smaller items, shipped them out to influencers, they wrote about them, did photoshoots. We could track everything in an excel sheet and see if it generated any sales, how good is this campaign actually and calculate everything. We use influencers quite a lot actually when we do campaigns together with brands. Sometimes they also come here to Copenhagen, and sometimes they work in groups, influencers, like they are friends travelling in Europe and come by to Copenhagen and they always ask if we have any brands they could promote or do photoshoots about. We did one fashion photoshoot with an influencer in summer, where she had a client, but we provided all production, location and all that. Now we have brands that want photoshoots, so we ask in our network of influencers, who is coming in this summer, because there are couple of fashion brands that wants to collaborate. So we work with brands or KOLs together with brands, but we also do it for ourselves so that we have some content to share, cause we live of the interest in our media. It is a mix, in an agency, they would only find an influencer for you, and you do the production and find a channel to push it out. We have done skincare, interior design, fashion, all the cool industries. But China is a though market and there is such a hard competition. The hardest is fashion, if you take the influencers most of them has probably started with fashion, if they want to be an influencer, they start with their look and clothes. Skincare and cosmetics is also a big one. The unique thing with Scandinavia with skincare is that we have all regulations, that it should be nontoxic, so you should be able to almost eat it. And there is a growing need for in China now, especially, moms who are pregnant or just had a baby. That is a growing market and that is where I see Scandinavian skincare for example.

Interviewer: How did the sales go?

Demand is growing and in our experience the sales went fine. But Scandinavian brands usually give brand a Danish name and then there is all the storytelling, because you need to tell and explain consumers what this brand and why this product is a good product. History, founder, why are they in this industry, why they started with this. And then you start selling or you ship it out to influencers to get some feedback. The influencers are also good, if you are not used to Chinese market, it is quite good feedback you can get from them. You ship them a bunch of products, pay them and all that and then you get feedback. They themselves may give you their own feedback on it, but if you follow the comments in the post or video, then you collect all that feedback and take it back to the brand. Then you can say this is the feedback from the market so far. Maybe people think the color of the bottle is strange or smell of the skincare is not sweet enough, then they know all this. Instead of looking for a distributor and pushing it through the distributor who promise they will sell a container of it, but then they stash that.

Rasmus: When you are an agency or a distributor, you need to find a channel to test a product out. We have our own media, we can ask our community to test the products and get feedback. We can make a focused post or write an article and get some feedback about the product and take it back to the brand.

Interviewer: Where do you post this first content to test the product out?

Rasmus: Weibo. It is standard.

Interviewer: How do you get exposure of your content?

Rasmus: We just post it. We tried to use…

Interviewer: How do you attract followers?

Rasmus: Just keep posting. When people share that is when we get exposure. If we create something interesting for our followers, they will maybe share with friends, then they friends see it and maybe follow us. We have bought advertising before on Weibo for post promotion, but the thing is we tried it couple of times years back and stopped. The followers we got were zombies, so we did it 3 years ago and our account boost up. We were quite sad, cause 1/3 of our followers were suddenly zombies and it do not reflect what our readers want. We also want to be transparent for the brands we work with. We could say we have million followers and use promotion advertising, but when you get zombies, it lasts for maybe half a year depends if they unfollow or their account get banned. It took a long time to get all zombies out from our followers, so the followers we have have quite niche interest in Scandinavia.

Interviewer: Do you use any other platforms?

Rasmus: We also use WeChat and we used Nice, which is like Instagram for younger generation and you can sell C2C. There is a lot of streetwear there, a lot of people sell sneakers etc, cause that's the thing now. We have been there a couple of years, but only to get insight for research. There is quite a lot of young people there, and you can get understanding what is trending.

Interviewer: Have you ever considered Xiaohongshu?

Rasmus: We are also there. We have our e-commerce there and we have an account to post just to support the e-commerce. This is because there are two different accounts, if you are a retailer brand then you cannot post the content, you need another like post account. When we did skincare, we got quite a good amount of orders there, so we were quite interested in this channel. You pay 30 thousand deposit just to be there, if the product is damaged, then the platform will pay back the refund to the customer from there. The skincare brand we worked with there, grew and went to their own distribution, so now the store is offline until we get new brands to put on there. We have so much trust in this platform and the content, we can easily look up brands, see the comments and what people say or buy. You can get a very good understanding if there is a demand for this product.

Interviewer: What are the challenges for you related to the Chinese social media or to make your account become Wanghong account?

Rasmus: I think it is just patience and time, I mean if you seat and wait nothing will happen.
Our strategy with Weibo account is to be relevant and consistent. We have seen people trying to copy what we do, but then they stop posting and people unfollow. It is patience game. Those that have the most patience and long perspective, instead of seeing a Chinese market as a one where you can sell a container of products and earn a lot of money and buy a new car, that is not how it works. Many people think that way, because it is a big market and so much money in the market, it is easy to sell any kind of products. The thing is you compete with Chinese in China who run online sales. You can be on Tmall and Taobao and sell to billions or millions, that is not true. It requires a lot of time and awareness you create about the product, this is probably the most challenging. You must be relevant and create the awareness. It is easy enough to get into all these platforms, but there is so much competition.

Interviewer: Did you consider any other platforms?

Rasmus: We really want to do video, because it is trending right now. On Weibo they have the form of story function like we have on WeChat, sometimes we use that. But in comparison with posts, it requires a lot. I need people to do the videos, with article, I can just use the writers, post it and get the feedback, videos take more time and we need people who can create them. We tried to work with brands and see if they could be interested in video campaigns, the production video they can also use the video on the brand's own platforms. But again we have to be consistent, if we do one video we should continue. If we come up with a new thing every time our followers will start to think what is this, what is that. It is the same if you go to a magazine, or follow an account, you follow their content for a reason. So for us, we need to figure out what we exactly want to do, in order to have our viewers or readers engaged.

Interviewer: What is social commerce for you, in your own understanding?

Rasmus: My understanding of it is that it is direct. Like from friends to friends, it could be that I tell you this coffee is the best coffee, but I can also do it on social media, since we are there as well. A lot of Xiaohongshu, they posted that you could do your own shop, even if you do not have a store or warehouse. So if you have knowledge of skincare or cosmetics, you can tell about it. Instead of your friends going down to nearby shop or buy online, they buy from you and you get commission. I see that as another way of putting on social, instead of a brand telling a group of people to post about it and they get commission if their friends buy. But here, I select the product because I actually think it is good and I want to share, and I get commission for that. I don’t think it is new, of course it is new online, but it has always been around. You always ask your friend what car to buy, where to eat etc. It is another way that is trackable and of course another way of selling. Again trust, we have influencers we trust, or direct friends to friends sales that makes it even more direct. Even if you go to the store, you will still ask your friends or find reviews online.

Appendix 7: Interview transcript with Teitur Jónasson from BingBang

Interviewer: Could you briefly tell us about yourself?

- Work only with the cross-border ecommerce (no operations in Mainland China)
- Mainly Scandinavian SMEs with no presence in China
- Set up WeChat account, content strategy, pulling customers, sales is a challenge because it is hard and expensive to get into big players JD, Tmall- So BingBang is creating their own sales channel to ease the pain of the small brands. Use WeChat account to drive sales. (6-7min)
- Partner up with Wuhan company, wholesale cross-border e-commerce
- WeChat is the core to create presence, but focus on Chinese tourist targeting (who come to Scandinavia and like some products, but do not trust third-party sellers on Tmall etc.)
- Year old company (rebranded recently to BingBang 冰棒)
- saw huge gap in marketplace for content marketing strategy for Nordic brands, so want to create BingBang 冰棒 as a sales channel

Interviewer: What is your understanding of social commerce?

Teitur: Next step from traditional ecommerce, you are using a lot of, driving engagement through engaging content and valuable engagement with the customer instead of just making a transaction, so it is much more deep thinking and it is connected to social media of course, but it goes further from e-commerce and advertising, you need to create value for the customer to engage him, so the purchase should be made.

Interviewer: Do you have any experiences on social commerce?

Teitur: We work mainly with SMEs, the big ones tend to have their own departments. We use WeChat as a home base, funnel location, it replaces what we think of the website in the West. So we try to set up a WeChat account so that it has presses, story-telling, engaging content- that is the bottom of the funnel. And then you can connect a store to that, like WeChat store, JD.com or some kind of sales channel. Our philosophy for marketing is to create the pull not the push, so we are not creating any need, we just meet the need. By identifying the customer persona, researching the habits, what they like so forth, you can adjust the content and interaction properly and then you are able to make them engage with the content, which leads to sales hopefully, looking at the customer journey. There is a value in the visit, engagement, even if they are not buying. This value is brand awareness, top of the funnel awareness. So if the customer finds, video, story, text, photo any kind of content, information, anything, if it fits to the needs to the customer, then you are solving customer's problem, even if they do not buy, they are getting brand awareness.

Interviewer: Are you using any other platforms?

Teitur: Weibo, Xiaohongshu. Xiaohongshu is actually much more important for us than Weibo, it is because of all the livestreaming, direct shops and there is good connectivity to WeChat. We do not do so much influencer, KOLs campaign, it is a bit too expensive and kind of a jungle. It is very hard to figure out which ones are real, they charge you per post, instead of per sale. We only focus on Tencent ecosystem, not Alibaba at all, we work with Tmall= Danish company has a shop on Tmall, we only help them with WeChat, creating brand presence on WeChat for their clients.
It has been difficult to explain to brands why they cannot just translate their marketing material from other countries and put it out there, why their strategy needs to be localized. That is very difficult for them to understand, why they need to put money in something, they already paid for.
It is a big challenge. Trust is a huge issue, it is on the top of mind all the time. Our biggest client is Icelandic fish and that has been a challenge. We used traceability system (scan QR on the package to see the source). We are B2C company into China, there are not many of those in DK. So we focus on end consumer. Authencity, proof of origin, verification, food traceability, that is why cross border is important. Research showed that Chinese consumer is willing to wait for the product to make sure it comes from Europe not within China. We have Icelandic toy company client and they are made in China- but then it is even more important to do the story-telling.

Interviewer: How do you drive traffic to the WeChat accounts, if that is the core of your marketing strategy?

Teitur: It is challenging, we see it as bottom of the funnel, so we use other things. But we are still learning, but it is a huge difficulty with Weibo because it is just disappearing. All these places Bilibili, Douyin, Little Red Book are very important, but we are working on a strategy right now. What is important as well now is your existing channel, which is your products, QR codes on your product, something you see on the shelf in the store, this O2O, is what we are working on right now. Increasing of O2O activities, lottery on WeChat, sth on the product in the promotional place in the store or membership discount card for repeated buyer. In China it is hugely difficult, not so simple as here with Facebook as Instagram where you just need a right consumer segment and the right content. In China I have not found any magic formula of doing this, there is difficulty in that.

Interviewer: How do you plan to kick start your own BingBang sales channel and create trust around it?

Teitur: Our core competence is reliability, creating story-telling, social commerce, attract people with fun content, quality engagement. We want to do the exact opposite from big Chinese marketplaces Tmall, Taobao etc. We want to create something unique, blend Nordic culture with Chinese culture. Go through niche audience, that will be attracted by that. WeChat mini program to start with, then Xiaohongshu direct store, and when we are big enough we want to create a shop with JD.

Interviewer: What is your opinion on Douyin and the recent popularity of video content?

Teitur: It is part of future, of course it is a trend that is going to be very important for engagement for a certain group of people.

Appendix 8: Notes from an interview with Kelly Wenjun Zhao from Ehub Nordic

- 如何在中国的平台上提高知名度: 看品牌与平台之间的协议，有些大品牌不需要做市场营销，但是有些品牌在国内的认知度比较低，所以我们还是要投放一些费用在市场营销上面帮助品牌推广。online marketing。电商平台的推广，淘宝品牌直播，微淘，淘宝客。kol：微博，小红书。

- 视频作为销售手段，:视频和直播的区别很大，直播是一边直播一边卖。vlog 其实还是和 kol 相关的。

- marketing 的过程中,蜂蜜卖的是最好的，品牌探秘，在淘宝上，店铺直播。

- 微信，小红书对你们的帮助大吗？我们自己有微信店铺，但是我们没有在微信上做任何推广，微信销量没有在天猫上好。我们在小红书上没有店铺，但是我们有 kol 在小红书上做推广。还是要看 kol 的知名度。前两年 kol 是非常有说服力的，但是现在 kol 的市场越来越大，成为 kol 的门槛越来越低，所以他们的带动作用有时候并不是很明显。

- 转化率低比较头疼。（解决方法？）找到产品本身的买点。trust not such an issue, since we work big Danish brands with established reputation and do cross border ecommerce 中国的社交平台又多又杂，小红书，抖音发展很快，一个公司想要进入中国需要知道自己的定位在哪里，还要充分了解中国的这些平台。中国的 kol 很多很多，不是所有的品牌都能负担的起

- 社交媒体和电商本来是两个不同的概念。阿里巴巴，京东是电商，社交媒体更多的是微信，微博。之后出现了新的渠道，像小红书，是社交媒体和电商体验相融合，比较新颖的概念。

Appendix 9: Interview with an employee from Xiaohongshu - transcript

(translation from Chinese)

1) The relationship between users and platform.

Q: Does the changes of slogan means the changes of strategies of Xiaohongshu?

Xiaohongshu is still in the entrepreneurial stage in the past few years, thus at this stage will change the strategic direction according to the needs of the market and users, including the guiding nature of slogan. The future development of Xiaohongshu is still uncertain. Now the goal of Xiaohongshu is to “mark your life”. It is a “community” that allows users to share all aspects of life. The main purpose is to share. In the past few years, Xiaohongshu belonged to a stage of doing platform. First, accumulated a large number of users through some real UGC sharing, and then for the next stage, for the startup company, it is definitely considering the realization of cash, then we will go through a commercial approach.

Q: How you work with celebrities and KOLs?

Xiaohongshu was introduced to the stars from 2018, and it was purely free at the beginning. We contacted dozens of stars and introduced them to the platform of Xiaohongshu. This attempt is tentative, and they are invited to share it on Xiaohongshu to see if the content they share is valuable and whether it can attract more and better users. After a period of sharing experiments, the results were found to be very ideal. Of course, these kols could not be shared on the platform of Xiaohongshu for free for a long time, so we launched a mechanism to cooperate with the stars.

Q: Will Xiaohongshu contact some popular users and cooperate with them to promote a brand?

Definitely. In fact, such a user is equivalent to kols. Because the profit model of Xiaohongshu has always been a self-operated product plus selling third-party (brands) products. Therefore, brands are more likely to find these kols to cooperate. Our self-operated product has its own spokesman.

Q: Is there any management of the behavior of advertising on the platform of Xiaohongshu (especially to those not related to the products you operate)?

For Xiaohongshu itself, there was no advertisement before 2019. If there are advertisements, it is not initiated by Xiaohongshu itself, but third-party merchants which use our platform to advertise their brands to sell their products. Since 2019, Xiaohongshu has begun to commercialize the way of advertising. We have a set of advertising R&D team to build an advertisement. For example, an auditing system and a post-production maintenance management system for advertising are responsible for setting up a relevant auditing platform by the technical team. Moreover, we have a dedicated review team in the community section to review the content posted by everyone.

Q: What is the competitive advantage of Xiaohongshu compared with other social commerce in China?

Xiaohongshu is not only an e-commerce company, we are a community e-commerce company, and it started from the community. The initial business segment is more of a skincare and beauty category because our target audience is women, and women's shared awareness and initiative are stronger. Then we will gradually expand into a number of areas, including the separate establishment of the male division to target topics for male audiences, such as sports, photography, and then we will arrange staff to write this part of the content. I think that the difference between Xiaohongshu and other social e-commerce platforms is that the content in our community is very real and the number of users is very large. This provides a solid foundation for the realization of the e-commerce and post-advertising we operate. The basics. And this business model is relatively rare in China for now.

2) The relationship between brands and platform.

Q: In addition to the self-operated brand of Xiaohongshu, how is the platform and brands choose each other to cooperate?

A good way is to use data analysis to see which products the user is searching for. Take beauty products as an example. Everyone may care about good domestic and foreign beauty brands. These will appear on the hot search list of Xiaohongshu. Then our colleagues in the marketing department will analyze the data and select some popular brands, to look for cooperate opportunity. For many other brands, they will also feel that Xiaohongshu is a good platform for raise consumption, and they will take the initiative to contact us.

Q: How do you manage your own brand?

Our self-operated products are divided into two lines, one is to get the production in the bonded area of the origin of the product, for example, the big-name brands of skin care products, health care products, and direct sales into the country by means of logistics. The other is that Xiaohongshu launched a self-owned brand called “REDelight” in 2018. It is a manufacturer to produce a batch of products represented by Xiaohongshu.

Appendix 10: In-depth interview with a consumer – transcript

1）你对 sc 的定义是什么？

Sc？微商吧。就是通过 social media 传播的，以 social media 为平台的商务活动。

2）那你会使用哪些 sc 的平台？

微信，微博。微博上有很多“什么值得买”，“每日白菜特价”，“北美省钱快报“。

3）你一般会选择哪些平台进行网上购物？选择他们的理由是什么？

淘宝，京东，亚马逊。

因为你使用过了，用户体验好，而且他们的品牌效应非常强。而且通常来讲，这些大的平台都有客服，如果买到假货了，你可以跟他们申诉，他们有自己处理的渠道。就像现在淘宝的处理渠道就非常好，他们有一个很清楚的仲裁方式，比如说，让你上传“证据“（图片之类的），你就不需要当面和商家沟通。而且本身第三方平台就是作为信用保证存在的。他们在商家那边都是收押金的，所以平台在确认了你说的是事实以后你会很快的得到 refund。总而言之，在这些平台上购物我可以得到非常方便快捷的售后保障，不需要用户去拜访销售商，只需要在线上上传你的购物资料就可以了。

4）你在 sc 平台上会积极分享自己的购物经验吗？

会呀。这就相当于 peer review 嘛，我认为这非常重要。评论多，和有照片有视频的评论可以给用户一个很真实的评价，特别是使用后的评价。我本人在上网购物的时候是会更偏向于看负面的评价，因为很多好的评价其实在这个产品的功能描述里面几乎已经被提及了，通常的话，我认为卖家想要隐藏的商品的缺陷会在用户使用之后会暴露出来，所以看差评就很容易能找得到。

5）你会购买平台上明星，“网红”推荐的商品吗？

不太会。因为我认为他们推荐某种产品是处于商业目的。而如果一个普通的互用来推荐的话我认为是跟可信的，因为他们的推荐是出于自己的使用感。

6）你认为 sc 把积累的用户量通过商业途径变现的模式是一种可持续性盈利模式吗？

我觉得是啊，因为这相当于平台已经把潜在的用户进行分类了，因为社交平台有一个 segmentation 的功能在里面，就是说，喜欢这类东西或者有这类需求的人通过 social 的方式已经把他们聚集起来了，毕竟只有相同兴趣的人才会在一起讨论相同的东西嘛。

7）像你一样很理智的消费者的消费行为也会被社交平台影响吗？

应该也是会的。因为 Sc 就是通过 social 的 influence 来影响我的消费过程。比如说网红的视频里推荐的商品，如果不知道，那你肯定不会买，但是如果你发现了很多人都买了你可能会也想尝试。虽然你对这类东西也不感兴趣，但是你看到很多人会买，那你可能也会有兴趣了解一下。我也会因为别人的推荐而购买一些商品。

8）最近一次的购物经历。

我在网上买了青团。（不怕买到卫生质量不过关的产品吗？）通常来讲商家在卖的时候应该是有一个质量保证的吧，每种食品都应该是强制通过质量检查的，有质量认证的，所以我觉得这个问题不大。一般大的平台是不会卖三无产品的，所以一般来说都是有基础的质量保证的。包括他们自身的平台效应，比如说在天猫上假货就会比较少，拼多多上假货就会多。虽然我没有在拼多多上买过东西，但我听说都是假的。

9）说说你对 sc 的印象。

我觉得微商都是大忽悠。还有抖音会有直播，直播就会有人在卖东西，但是我感觉也是在消费粉丝。

Appendix 11: Platforms assessment based on adapted framework of Han and Trimi (2017)

Legend
T: transaction-based platform
R: relationship-based platform
C: content-based platform

Design components	Orientation toward types	Design features	WeChat	Weibo	Pinduoduo	Xiaohongshu	Douyin	Taobao
Social-related exchange activities	T, R	group buying	✅		✅			✅
	C, R	feedback functions (rate, review, comment, like)	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
	R	Interest groups and communities	✅	✅		✅		✅
	C	hashtags		✅		✅	✅	✅
	C	save function		✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
	R	sharing functions (share, scan QR code, tag others)	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
	T	Reward functions (electronic coupon and/or Red pocket)	✅	✅	✅	✅		✅
information	C	user-generated text and photo content	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
	C	user-generated video content	✅	✅		✅	✅	✅
	C	user-generated live-stream content		✅			✅	✅
	R	social networking services	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
	C	advertisements	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
Technology	C	algorithm for content feed/recommendation		✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
	C	machine learning (big data)			✅	✅	✅	✅
	R	QR codes	✅	✅				✅
	T	built-in shop (Wechat/douyin shop)	✅	✅		✅	✅	✅

	R	in-app communication	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
	T	Integrated payment system	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
	-	Mobile app	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
Management	R, T, C	Seamless connection with other platforms	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
	C	cooperate with brands	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
	C, R	cooperate with influencers		✅		✅	✅	✅
	R	post-purchase support			✅	✅		✅
	T	secure logistics			✅			✅