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# Digital Social Norms and Mobile-Based Social Networking Applications:

## A Study of Urban Chinese Young People's Use of WeChat

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**Abstract**

Today, the advent of mobile-based social networking applications is dramatically changing how urban Chinese young people socialise with each other, as well as how they experience the world. In particular, WeChat – the most popular Chinese mobile-based social networking application – has been launched onto the market, attracting millions of young users in urban China. The ways in which young people use this application are inextricably linked to the dynamics of their urban living experiences, forming the digital social norms to which they adhere in their everyday lives. In this thesis, I develop an interdisciplinary approach which synthesises affect/new materialism and traditional cultural studies (e.g. symbolic interactionism) in order to understand the digital social norms emerging with urban Chinese young people's everyday use of WeChat. In particular, Chinese college students are a representative group of young people, who are early adopters of WeChat and lead the trend of its usage in China. Through a year-long netnographic enquiry with 19 college students recruited from a chosen university in China, the research uncovers: 1) how the affective design of WeChat attracts urban Chinese young people's attention and influences their everyday practices; 2) how these young people practise self-presentation through their personalisation of space; 3) how these young people socialise with close-by strangers; as well as 4) how these young people preserve their spatial privacy. The outcomes of the discussion not only help to understand the digital social norms emerging with this particular form of technology among urban Chinese younger generation but also develop an in-depth understanding of the relationship between culture and technology that speaks to a broader audience.

**Keywords**

Mobile-Based Social Networking Applications; WeChat; China; Urban Young People; Digital Social Norms

**Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that I have correctly acknowledged the work of others. This thesis is in accordance with University and School guidance on good academic conduct (and how to avoid plagiarism and other assessment irregularities). University guidance is available at www.ncl.ac.uk/right-cite

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### 1.1 Background of the Study

As social beings, we may find that the ways in which we behave every day usually follow certain unwritten rules or rituals. For instance, we tend to use polite phrases when we are asking other people for help; we smile when we are being introduced to someone; and we pay attention to other pedestrians when we encounter them in the street. These rituals are aspects of social norms underpinning the particular modes of behaviour that we adhere to in our everyday encounters with other members of society (Sherif, 1936). They guide us how to behave appropriately when interacting with other people (Cialdini, 2003, p. 105). Today, our social norms are constantly shaped and reshaped by their adoption of emerging digital communication technologies, leading to the advent of digital social norms (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011, p. 91; van Dijck, 2013, p. 19). Using the term digital social norms, I describe a set of rules or rituals peculiar to young people's use of digital communication technologies. Taking the emergence of mobile phones as an example, urban young people in Japan have become anxious about failing to respond to an incoming message (M. Ito & Okabe, 2005a, 2005b; Mizuko Ito, 2005). This is due to the fact that, since these young people carry their mobile phones with them wherever they go, there are digital social norms emerging which require them to respond to friends' messages within a certain amount of time, unless they have a legitimate reason not to do so (M. Ito & Okabe, 2005a, 2005b; Mizuko Ito, 2005). Adhering to this norm helps them to leave a good impression to their friends.

In this thesis, I explore the digital social norms emerging with urban Chinese young people's everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications. Amongst all forms of digital communication technologies, mobile-based social networking applications have been increasingly popular since the late 2000s and early 2010s. Mobile-based social networking applications are a form of social networking applications, sharing many similar characteristics with older social networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and a long list of similar technologies that we are already familiar with. However, these newer applications are mainly used on personal portable mobile devices, due to the rise of smart mobile phones and tablet personal computers, which facilitate mobile internet access across the globe (de

Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 13). Instagram is probably one of the most trending mobile-based social networking applications in the West. This application allows young people to sign up for a personal account, connect with a list of friends, and then share photographs and short videos with their friends via mobile phones (Frommer, 2010). By the end of 2016, Instagram has attracted almost 80 million active users in the US and over 400 million worldwide (Statista, 2016a, 2016b). The emergence of mobile-based social networking applications has changed the landscape of the social media market, leading to a mobile-based social networking era. Internet giants, such as Facebook, have also launched their own mobile applications in order to address this market change as well. Figures show that there are more than 1.5 billion monthly active Facebook users with almost 1 billion of them using only their mobile phones to access their personal Facebook account (Smith, 2016).

Mirroring the emerging popularity of Instagram and Facebook Mobile in the West, China has witnessed the rising popularity of WeChat – a similar mobile-based social networking application – among the younger generation of mobile phone users. Figures show that over one-third of Chinese internet users who reduced their use of other social networking applications have shifted to WeChat (CNNIC, 2014b, p. 69). WeChat was launched by the Chinese internet giant –Tencent in 2011 (Cai & Chen, 2012, p. 517). In contrast to the current version, the application was originally designed as a simple mobile-based instant messaging service, allowing users to send only free text and voice messages, like a Chinese version of WhatsApp or Facebook Mobile Messenger. However, Tencent repositioned WeChat in the marketplace in 2012 by incorporating more complex functionalities into the application (J. Huang, 2012). In common with many other mobile-based social networking applications (e.g. Facebook Mobile or Line), today's WeChat enables Chinese young people to create a personal profile, comprising a profile image, information about their place of origin ('Region'), a personal status ('What's Up'), and a personal photo album (like 'Timeline' on Facebook Mobile or 'Photo Wall' on Instagram). The application also facilitates the sharing of Moments updates (stream-based content – similar to Facebook News Feed) with or without location check-ins (Mao, 2014, p. 636). In addition, these young people may also use the application to search for and communicate with others who were previously unknown to them via stranger social plug-ins, including 'Look Around', 'Shake', and 'Drift Bottle' (Mao,

2014, p. 636). The variety of functionalities provides good user experiences. Within the past few years, WeChat has become literally the most popular mobile-based social networking application in China, and has attracted almost 700 million monthly active users (Statista, 2016e).

This thesis focuses on urban Chinese young people, exploring the digital social norms to which they adhere in their everyday use of WeChat. The discussion is contextualised within urban youths' life experiences in post-reform urban China. China[1] is currently undergoing rapid social changes (Yeoh, 2010, p. 239). The massive economic, political, and socio-cultural transformations of China have attracted attention across the globe (Chow, 1993; John, 2008; Y. Wang & Yao, 2003). These transformations arguably began during the launch of the 'Reform and Open' policy in the late 1970s and accelerated during economic reform of the early 1990s (Dillon, 2009, p. p.xvi; Halliday, 1980; Hoffman, 2006, p. 511; Yeoh, 2010, p. 240). The 'Reform and Open' policy in China refers to a transformation of the state policies from socialism and planned economy to capitalism and market economy, including the termination of permanent employment, the implementation of performance-based employment, the adoption of overseas investment, and the acceptance of Western management philosophies (Long, Kuang, & Buzzanell, 2013; Ong & du Cros, 2012; A. S. Tsui, Schoonhoven, Meyer, Lau, & Milkovich, 2004). The reform of China has achieved great success given the highly remarkable performance of China's economy during the past three decades (Yeoh, 2010, p. 239). By 2010, the once low-income state has already overtaken Japan as the second largest economy of the world (Barboza, 2010).

However, life experiences in urban areas and that in rural regions refer to completely different stories. By 'urban', I mean cities which are administrated by prefectural-level governments and are opposing the rural areas. This rural/urban dualism, as Lisa Hoffman (2010, p. 46) notes, was initiated by the country's notorious Household Registration System. In China, all people are required to register as either rural or urban residents, depending on their place of origin (Dillon, 2009, p. 63). It is undeniable that the 'Reform and Open' policy takes agricultural population into

[1] By China I refer to mainland China in my thesis. Hong Kong and Macau (the Special Administrative Regions) and Taiwan (arguably the Republic of China) are not included, because the political system and socio-cultural environment of these regions are dramatically different from the mainland.

account. During the past three decades, the absolute poverty population in rural areas was reduced from 250 million in 1978 to 21.48 million in 2006 (X. Fan, 2008, pp. 14–19). Nevertheless, the average income of the rural economy-employed Chinese population is ¥5,900 (approximately £590) per annum and, therefore, significantly lower than China's GDP per capita (¥19,100 – £1,910) (Tobin, 2011). The development of urban cities and rural areas is imbalanced in post-reform China. The Chinese household registration system, furthermore, discriminates against the rural population, discouraging migration from rural areas to urban cities[2]. This rural/urban dualism allows urban Chinese dwellers to reap greatest benefits from the economic development of post-reform China, causing the rapid changes in their everyday lives and believes.

The rise of individualistic culture is one of the most notable characteristics of the contemporary ethos in urban China. Scholars, such as Bond (1996), Kleinman and Kleinman (1999), Kolstad and Gjesvik (2014), and Scheid (2002), have noticed a dramatic transition from the former collectivistic culture to the recent individualistic culture amongst today's urban Chinese population, because of their material prosperity and life experiences in urban cities. The core value of collectivism sees each of the individuals as a part of a highly coherent society (Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014, p. 266). In contrast, the core value of individualism emphasises the autonomy and diversity of each individual (Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014, p. 266). The rise of individualism reflects the capacity for self-reflexivity that these young people have developed in the late modern China. Following Giddens (1991, p. 75), self-reflexivity relates to the capacity to be sovereign and independent from other social members. In other words, to be self-reflexive is to be individualistic and to acknowledge the value of one's existence as an individual human being. People's capacity to be self-reflexive refers to the democratisation of interpersonal relationships associated with economic growth and cultural commodification, as well as all those relevant socio-cultural changes in the late modernity (Giddens, 1991, p. 3). Today's urban Chinese people value individualistic lifestyles, mirroring the increase of their self-reflexive capacity.

[2] Rural migrants have to gain an urban household registration in order to permanently live and work in urban cities (Meng et al., 2013, p. 2). Otherwise, they have no access to any welfare, benefits, or healthcare at all.

The appreciation of individualistic culture is most apparent amongst the post-90s Chinese younger generation living in urban cities (Yao, Zhongyuan, & Jian, 2011, p. 18). In China, generations are usually described 'according to which decade they were born in' (Sun, 2012). The post-90s generation, therefore, refers to those young people who were born between 1990 and 1999 (Kisselmann, 2013). According to KPMG (2014, p. 1), there are more than 135 million post-90s generation young people living in China, accounting for almost 10 per cent of the whole Chinese population. While the post-90s generation has begun to enter China's workforce, many of them are still of school age, studying at a middle school or a higher education institution. For those born in the 1990s and growing up in the post-reform China, the material prosperity of the era has encouraged them to develop self-reflexivity, enjoy the individualistic lifestyle, and become much more individualised than their parents' generation.

Despite the in-group varieties, contemporary Chinese college students are representative of the post-90s urban population in China. Their representativeness comes from the unique advantages they may take from being a student at a university. In China, education has historically been considered as an important way to get a better life (Dillon, 2009). Moreover, studying at a higher education institution is also associated with more realistic benefits: it provides one with an urban residential status in the Chinese household registration system (Meng, Li, Loerbroks, Wu, & Chen, 2013, p. 2). Indeed, living in cities with an urban household status means being able to benefit from urban material prosperity and life experiences. No matter what status Chinese college students held in the household registration system in the past, their studentship with higher education institutions guarantees their access to the benefits of being an urban citizen. Studying at a university thus not only develops Chinese young people's competitiveness in the future employment market but also enables them to enjoy the material prosperity of urban living, shaping them into a representative group of urban Chinese young people who appreciate individualistic culture and lifestyle.

Amongst contemporary Chinese college students, an individualistic culture is exemplified by the pursuit of personal pleasure and a Western middle-class lifestyle. Mass media plays a significant role in encouraging these young people's pursuit in this respect: Since the 'Reform and Open' policy was implemented, state control

over the mass media has been relaxed, creating a prosperous and diversified contemporary Chinese media industry (Dillon, 2009, p. 96). Despite the prohibition of discussing sensitive topics, such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and certain domestic political issues, today's Chinese media industry is allowed to compete for the audience by providing different styles and content (Liu, 2011, p. 25). Urban Chinese young people, thus, are able to consume a variety of Western cultural products, including films, TV series, soap operas, entertainment programmes, and the advertising of mass consumption imported from Western countries. Access to Western cultural products encourages these young people to chase after 'private materialistic gains and comfort' rather than 'plain living and collective welfare' (Liu, 2011, p. 27).

Moreover, the one-child policy and its implications for household living experiences also impact on the post-90s urban Chinese young people's pursuit of personal satisfaction and Western middle-class lifestyle. In the 1980s, the Chinese government started using one-child policy to control the size of the families in China (Chambers, 2012, 2016; Hesketh, Lu, & Xing, 2005; Saich, 2004). The Chinese government introduced a form of fertility control with an objective of slowing down the population growth so as to reduce the burden on utilities (Hesketh et al., 2005, p. 1,171-1,176). The one-child policy has been recently revoked but it already has had a great impact on the East Asian country's nuclear family structure, leading to a child-centred culture in the home (Chambers, 2012, p. 146). Brought up as an only child in a family, each member of the post-90s generation urban generation receives a great deal of attention from their parents (Ong & du Cros, 2012, p. 748). In terms of economy, the parents usually spend less on themselves and save to satisfy their only child's desire for consumer products (Yueh, 2006). According to Liu (2011, p. 58), an average of 50 to 70 per cent of the income of a Chinese household is spent on the only child, covering the cost of his or her education and consumption. Furthermore, the only-child family structure also encourages the parents to communicate more with their child, creating a more democratised relationship in the home (Liu, 2011). All these significant changes in the late modern China heighten the post-90s generation Chinese college students' self-reflexive capacity, encouraging them to appreciate an individual-centred Western middle-class lifestyle in the urban cities. These young people's individualistic culture is reflected in their everyday use of digital communication technologies as well.

In urban China, young people are the largest group of digital communication technology users (Liu, 2011, p. 37). These urban young people are early adapters of emerging digital communication technologies, and they lead the trends in mobile-based social networking application usage in the East Asian country (Liu, 2011). I am by no means suggesting that the findings on urban Chinese young people's WeChat usage can be over generalised to describe any other mobile-based social networking applications used by any other social or age groups. However, scrutinising these young people's practices on WeChat helps unpack the logic and reasoning behind the social influences of these type of applications, providing a glimpse into the interplay between people's everyday practices and technologies. In particular, this thesis explores the digital social norms that are emerging with urban Chinese young people's use of WeChat, through a case study of Chinese college students recruited from a chosen university in China. Chinese college students are typical of the Chinese younger generation living in urban cities. With a particular focus on Chinese college students, this thesis explores the digital social norms that are emerging with the Chinese younger generation's use of WeChat.

WeChat is widely used among today's Chinese college students. These students use the application to practise self-presentation and to manage and develop their social networks, living a significant portion of their everyday lives on the technology. Today's Chinese college students are a representative group of the Chinese younger generation who were born in the 1990s and are usually labelled as the post-90s generation. The students grew up in the post-reform China and have many identical characteristics. They enjoy material satisfactions, are significantly influenced by Western mass consumer cultures, and, therefore, share many similar features with their peers in the West (Liu, 2011). Having been raised in a one-child family, these students share particularly close relationships with their parents (Hjorth & Gu, 2012). Leaving home for university is probably the first time most of them have lived away from home. Their emotional attachments to their hometown rely heavily on the continuous interactions with parents and old friends on popular mobile-based social networking applications, such as WeChat. Chinese college students are typical of the Chinese younger generation living in urban cities. Their particular life experiences and heavy use of WeChat provide a glimpse into mobile-based social networking application usage in urban China, making them a good sample group to

explore urban Chinese young people's digital social norms. The empirical data I gathered through the case study offers insights into the logic and reasoning of how the use of mobile-based social networking applications influences an understanding of digital social norms among younger generations in urban China.

### 1.2 Research Questions

In this thesis, I focus on the digital social norms emerging with urban Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications. I analyse these digital social norms with a specific emphasis on four important issues respectively:

(a) How and why WeChat has become popular amongst Chinese young people, allowing the application to manifest significant influences on their everyday practices.

(b) How these young people practise self-presentation on the application.

(c) How they use the application to manage and develop social networks.

(d) How they cope with surveillance taking place on the application.

In order to mediate digital social norms, a (mobile-based) social networking application has to be accepted by young people and used in their everyday lives. When signing up for an account on a (mobile-based) social networking application, young people are always required to construct a personal profile and upload user-generated content, presenting an image of themselves to their friends (Chambers, 2013, p. 73). The management and development of social networks always comprise a crucial dimension of young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications (Lambert, 2013, pp. 77–78). This use of the application then causes their concerns over personal privacy. In this sense, the above issues describe four important dimensions of urban Chinese young people's everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications. Scrutinising these four issues helps us to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the reasoning behind the popularity of mobile-based social networking applications with urban Chinese youths and its impacts (both opportunities and risks) on these youths' everyday lives.

### 1.3 Approaches to the Study

This piece analyses urban Chinese youths' digital social norms with aims to provide both theoretical and empirical contributions to knowledge. In terms of theoretical contributions: traditionally, media and cultural studies provide two theoretical routes to study young people's digital social norms: 1) a socio-cultural interpretation and 2) technological affordance interpretation[3]. Following the former route, culture is understood as the independent variable that determines the ways in which young people use digital communication technologies (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 2). With a particular focus on East Asia, scholars, such as Liu (2011) and Hjorth and Gu (2012), have analysed how the Chinese younger generation uses digital communication technologies, referring to the Chinese socio-cultural context. These scholars emphasise that it is the late-modern urban culture that nurtures the Chinese younger generation's self-reflexivity, encouraging their entertainment- and self-interest-centred usage of digital communication technologies (Hjorth & Gu, 2012; Liu, 2011). Their literature, nonetheless, provides a limited account of how technologies' characteristics influence user practices. In contrast to the socio-cultural interpretation, some other media and cultural researchers, such as boyd (2007, 2008, 2011, 2014) and Hjarvard (2013), are interested in investigating how digital social norms are mediated in relation to the affordances of digital communication technologies. Affordances are based upon the material characteristics of technologies, which facilitate certain practices (Hutchby, 2001, 2003, 2013). While acknowledging young people's agency and self-reflexivity, this genre of scholarship articulates how affordances of digital communication technologies influence the patterns of their everyday practices (Hjarvard, 2013). Nevertheless, this genre is still incomplete: it somehow takes affordances for granted, failing to articulate how affordances of a technology are appropriated through its design. We may find that Liu (2011) and Hjorth and Gu's (2012) literature involves a culturally deterministic emphasis, while boyd (2007, 2008, 2011) and Hjarvard's (2013) scholarship may reproduce a technological determinism. A separate account of technological and socio-cultural factors, however, is unhelpful as the two factors are entwined in our everyday lives (Ash, 2015b; M. B. Hansen, 2006). As Hansen (2006, p. 299) notes,

> There is simply no such thing as technical determinism, not because technics do not determine our situation, but because they do not (and cannot) do so

[3] For more details please also see Chapter 2 - Digital Social Norms and Everyday Practices.

> from a position that is outside of culture; likewise, there is no such thing as cultural constructivism understood as a rigid, blanket privileging of ideology or cultural agency – not because culture does not construct ideology and experience, because it does not (and cannot) do so without depending on technologies that are beyond the scope of its intentionality, of the very agency of cultural ideology.
>
> (M. B. Hansen, 2006, p. 299)

Neither cultural determinism nor technological determinism facilitates a comprehensive understanding of urban Chinese young people's digital social norms. This is because both approaches assume that 'humans and technologies are separated in the first place, which allow one to determine the other' (Ash, 2015b, p. 9). However, an emerging body of literature, such as the work by Ash (2015a, 2015b), Kittler (2009), and Stiegler (1998, 2008, 2009), has identified that human history is, in fact, a co-evolution of human beings and technologies. Fire making was a 'new' technology developed in primitive society (Gorman, 2008, pp. 102–105). This technology changed the ways in which human beings process raw ingredients (Gorman, 2008, pp. 102–105). Human beings started eating cooked food and are therefore able to easily absorb more nutrition (Gorman, 2008, pp. 102–105). This led to the increase of human beings' brain size, enabling them to develop new technologies and become more civilised (Stiegler, 1998, p. 2). Similar but more complex interplays amongst human bodies, everyday practices, technological innovation and adoption are still taking place in contemporary society. As previously mentioned, Ito and Okabe (2005a, 2005b) have already uncovered how mobile phones influence Japanese young people's social practices. While everyday lives, technology usage, and technology design are inseparable, a comprehensive analysis of the formation of digital social norms must acknowledge how the design of technologies socially and materially influences young people's everyday practices. This thesis, therefore, attempts to develop a theoretical approach to analysing how urban Chinese young people's digital social norms are formed in relation to the sociality- and materiality-entwined dynamics of their everyday lives.

Furthermore, this thesis addresses urban Chinese young people's digital social norms with a particular focus on their everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications. In the past, studies of digital social norms, such as the research by boyd (2011) and Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2007), emphasise the

relation between young people and social networking applications. Little attention, however, has been paid to how the technologies change the interaction between these young people and their surroundings. This is because social networking applications of that time were mainly accessed through terminal devices, such as laptops or desktop personal computers, which are used in fixed locations (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011, p. 9). Users' other everyday activities, therefore, were often precluded when they used social networking applications (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011, p. 7). They had to stop attending to other things and then find a suitable place to access their personal account with minimised interruptions from the outside world. This led to an imaginary disconnection between users and their surroundings. However, today's mobile-based social networking applications are accessed via mobile devices, allowing young people to use while in motion. In urban cities, these young people's immediate surroundings change as they move around; this continuously influences the data they generate and access on mobile applications (Moores, 2012). Thus, a comprehensive understanding of the digital social norms emerging with young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications has to consider how their use of the applications is shaped by their dynamic interactions with surroundings as well. Thus, this thesis also attempts to analyse the formation of Chinese young people's digital social norms with an account of their bodily encounters with surroundings in urban cities as well.

The theoretical objective of this thesis is to develop a non-deterministic understanding of urban Chinese young people's digital social norms. Most of the literature with deterministic views fails to consider how young people's use of digital communication technologies is shaped within the specific context of their detailed everyday lives. A quantitative research method was often used to exemplify the scholars' assumptions with little concern that important issues might be overlooked in a theoretical approach (e.g. boyd, 2007, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Lampe et al., 2007). In this thesis, I avoid the deterministic views also through using a netnographic enquiry method to collect and analyse original data. As I will introduce in Chapter 3, netnography is an ethnographic data collection and analysis method which incorporates the assistance of digital communication technology[4]. This method allows me to gather a substantial amount of enriched qualitative data

[4] For more details please see Chapter 3 – Netnographic Research Method and My Empirical Data Collection.

through observing and interacting with 19 college students recruited from a university in China. The empirical data gathered enable me to gain a detailed and in-depth understanding of how WeChat is used in Chinese college students' everyday lives. A detailed understanding of urban Chinese young people's digital social norms is thereby developed via an interactive and open-ended dialogue between my theoretical construction and empirical analysis in the remaining chapters.

### 1.4 Chapter Outlines

The following chapters of the thesis build on and further develop my approach as follows. Chapter 2 provides a detailed review of the existing approaches to the studies of digital social norms and (Chinese) young people's use of digital communication technologies. I unpack how the socio-cultural context interpretation and the mediation approach represent two important ways to analyse the formation of young people's digital social norms. In terms of the socio-cultural context interpretation, a particular focus has been given to the literature which scrutinises how contemporary urban life experiences influence the ways in which Chinese young people use digital communication technologies. However, both approaches are incomplete because neither of them theorises about the complex socio-cultural and material contexts in which people's uses of digital communication technologies are formed. To address this gap, I, therefore, construct a non-deterministic theoretical framework to analyse the digital social norms emerging with Chinese college students' use of WeChat.

Chapter 3 addresses the execution of my empirical case study. By examining the existing literature of digital social norms, I found that the lack of detailed observation and understanding of users' everyday lives is one of the main reasons reproducing the previous mentioned deterministic or virtual/physical dualistic views. To overcome these weaknesses, I use netnography – a newly invented, digital communication technology-assisted ethnographic method – to collect and analyse my empirical data. This chapter outlines how I conducted the present year-long netnographic empirical research and articulates what methodological and practical issues appear in the execution of this method in my research practice. The data I collected through the present netnographic enquiry are used in the later chapters to inform a dialogue between theories and empiricism. The data allow me to reinforce my arguments with convincing evidence.

In Chapter 4, I construct a non-deterministic theoretical framework, which comprises a synthesis of affective account and everyday practice literature, to analyse urban Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications. Affects, following affect studies, are the outcomes of encounters among human bodies, technological bodies, and object bodies, which open up these bodies to new capacities for action (Ash, 2010, p. 657; Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Derrida, 2002, p. 62). By combining an affective account and an everyday practice scope, I scrutinise urban Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications by examining how the technologies are designed. This approach neither refers to cultural determinism nor reproduces technological determinism. Instead, it addresses how the functionalities of the technologies affect young people's everyday practices. It provides an epistemological understanding of how the socio-cultural and material entwinement of everyday practices influences the mediation of digital social norms to which urban Chinese young people adhere in their use of WeChat.

In Chapter 5, I scrutinise the digital social norms emerging with Chinese young people's use of WeChat with a particular focus on how they present themselves on mobile-based social networking applications. Following Mead (1934) and Goffman's (1959, 1963, 1967) symbolic interactionism, we can understand self-presentation as a form of stage performance through which young people manage the presentation of their self-image by using available digital symbols. This chapter then examines how this form of practice is redefined in Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications in relation to their bodily encounters with their surroundings. This helps relate the ways in which urban Chinese young people incorporate mobile-based social networking applications into their everyday engagement with and experiences of urban spaces.

In Chapter 6, I discuss urban Chinese young people's digital social norms relating to their everyday social networking activities on mobile-based social networking applications. Building upon Haythornthwaite's (2002, 2005) conceptualisation of latent ties, we may say that activating connections with strangers can be desirable in certain scenarios, helping users of digital communication technologies to develop social capital. This chapter investigates the 'certain scenarios' by referring to the spatial context of contemporary urban Chinese young people's everyday lives.

Through focusing on Chinese college students' use of location-based stranger social plug-ins provided by WeChat, I articulate how spatial proximity becomes a form of affects that influences these young people's willingness to activate connections with strangers and how this mode of practices is influenced by the particularity of urban lives in late-modern China.

In Chapter 7, I address urban Chinese young people's digital social norms relating to surveillance on mobile-based social networking applications. Through closely looking into Chinese college students' concerns over privacy, I articulate how privacy and surveillance become spatially articulated in the mobile social networking era. With a particular focus on the conflict arising between Chinese college students and their parents, this chapter discusses how these young people develop social techniques to cope with their parents' spatial collateral surveillance and how this influences their everyday mobility in urban spaces. This chapter, alongside the previous chapters, explains how the digital social norms emerging with urban Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications relate to the ways in which their practices are affected by their bodily encounters with their surroundings in the urban spaces.

Chapter 7 is followed by a concluding chapter (chapter 8), which provides further insights into the salient points that I discuss in this thesis. The chapter reiterates the contribution to knowledge made by my discussion of digital social norms in the previous chapters; it explains how the affective account and the new materialism can be creatively used alongside traditional cultural studies approach to analyse technological usage. This chapter also examines the future direction of the studies in mobile media and locative media, as well as emerging wearable technologies.

# Chapter 2. Everyday Practices and Urban Chinese Young People's Digital Social Norms:

## Socio-Cultural Context and the Use of Mobile-Based Social Networking Applications

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical review of the literature which scrutinises urban Chinese young people's digital social norms. Digital social norms are formed in everyday practices. In addressing everyday practices, I refer to Barnes (2001), Bourdieu (1977, 1986, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1991), and Turner's (1994) scholarship, defining social norms as the patterns of practices to which people adhere in everyday lives. This scholarship articulates an epistemology of the studies of social norms, which requires scholars to observe and then to understand people's behaviours in their everyday lives. Nevertheless, while an everyday-practice approach provides an epistemological foundation to scrutinise social norms, it is necessary to develop a conceptual framework specific to the digital social norms peculiar to urban Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications for my empirical case study.

In order to analyse how digital social norms are formed in urban Chinese young people's everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications, I firstly evaluate two popular theoretical routes in the existing literature. These two routes include 1) an interpretation based upon the Chinese socio-cultural context and 2) the technological particularity of mobile-based social networking applications. Following the former route, scholars, such as Liu (2011) and Hjorth and Gu (2012), use the post-reform Chinese socio-cultural context to explain how digital communication technologies are adopted and used by Chinese younger generation living in urban cities. The socio-cultural context approach articulates (at least partially) why particular modes of technology usage are shared among the members of this particular social group in China. However, I argue that an over-reliance on the socio-cultural interpretation is inadequate since the digital social norms also refer to how young people adopt a digital communication technology in their everyday lives, because of its material characteristics. To move beyond the socio-cultural interpretation, boyd (2007) and Hjarvard (2013) advocate a mediation approach to

understand how the affordances of digital communication technologies mediate digital social norms. The mediation approach helps position the study of young people's digital social norms with an acknowledgement of the particular characteristics of digital communication technologies. Nevertheless, my critical review also shows that the existing mediation approach is also inadequate because it often involves a fixed understanding of the materiality of digital communication technologies. I therefore also address the strengths and weaknesses of the above two approaches in this chapter. This discussion helps develop an interdisciplinary conceptual framework, which I shall address in detail in the later chapters through engaging in a dialogue between theories and empiricism. This chapter thus addresses the following three salient points:

(1) Why the formation of social norms relates to people's everyday practices.

(2) How the existing research uses Chinese socio-cultural context to interpret the formation of Chinese young people's digital social norms and why this approach is limited.

(3) How the existing research uses mediation approach to articulate the formation of (Chinese) young people's digital social norms and why this approach has to be further developed.

### 2.2 Social Norms and Everyday Practices

In order to analyse the formation of social norms, an understanding of habitus is helpful. According to Bourdieu (1984, p. 114), habitus refers to how people behave in their everyday lives, describing the pattern of behaviours that they learn to respond to the encounters with the world. Habitus is transposable 'in that people carry their dispositions with them as they enter new settings', but it is generally durable as it has been 'internalised in individuals through early socialisation in a family or primary group' (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007, p. 25). We incorporate habitus to deal with the world and our habitus perpetuates in our continuous everyday practices (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 53). As Crossley (2013, p. 139) notes,

> Habitus implies a flexible disposition which, though pre-reflective, remains commensurate with purposive action and in no way precludes intelligence, understanding, strategy or knowledge on the part of the actor.
>
> (Crossley, 2013, p. 139)

Thus, the concept of habitus, similar to social norms, captures the patterns of behaviours that we generally adhere to and have taken for granted in our everyday lives. For example, footballers do not have to think reflectively about what they should do in a game. They would be able to kick the ball at the right angle instinctively so as to score a goal for their teams as soon as they entered the football ground (Crossley, 2013, p. 139). The footballers' instinctive actions are the unconscious reflection of what they have seen and what they have learned in the past. The appropriate modes of action and reaction are formed, sustained, and gradually become habitus through their recurrent practices. Following Bourdieu's (1984, 1990b) habitus, we may find that social norms to which we adhere are formed in and continuously influenced by our everyday practices. Social norms emerge as forms of habitus. They are the rules and principles that 'people have learned from repetition so that they can do them smoothly, easily, and competently' (B. Barnes, 2001, p. 23).

Social norms are formed in our everyday practices at an individual level. Despite being a collective pattern of practices, social norms have to be consigned to individuals through their own learning process. The ways in which individuals behave usually become similar through shared learning experience for certain purposes (Turner, 1994). Nonetheless, individuals are also able to behave in their distinct own ways, because one's everyday practices are always different in detail from another's (Turner, 1994). It becomes apparent that Turner's (1994) understanding of social norm formation emphasises the role of people's agency in their everyday practices. As such social norms are the similarities shared among individuals' distinct everyday practices. People usually choose to follow a similar pattern of behaviour to achieve certain social goals. For example, people tend to show their friendliness in order to receive the same feedback from other people. However, they are also free to breach the social norms, because these norms are never a compelling force to them. Turner (1994) provides a constructionist way to understand how social norms are formed

and maintained within people's everyday practice. However, his approach overemphasises the individual's agency and fails to consider the influence of the ubiquitous relations between a person and the outside world that he or she deals with. This means that one's position in the society and his or her relations with the outside world are central to the formation of the social norms that he or she adheres to.

By taking the relationship between individuals and the outside world into account, social norms are also the outcomes of our shared practices. Following Barnes (2001, p. 25), we can argue that our everyday practices are operated at a collective level as well. These shared social practices are achieved through social members acting or expecting others to enact together. For each individual, the shared practices have to be 'generated on every occasion' through coordination and alignment with other social members and social factors (B. Barnes, 2001, p. 25). Social norms, like habitus, are, therefore, also the products of our collective routine activities, which shape and reshape the way in which we deal with the outside world (Swidler, 2001, p. 74). The formation of social norms inevitably involves the influence of collective social process which entails our encounters and interactions with the outside world. For example, cavalry usually has a standard process in riding (which can be seen as a kind of norms). The riding norms are constructed because new riders always learn from fellow occupants, especially senior fellow occupants (B. Barnes, 2001, p. 25). If the senior fellow occupants behave in a certain way, the junior fellow occupants generally follow their example because the latter group tends to believe that the way the former group behaves is 'accurate' and 'appropriate' (B. Barnes, 2001, p. 25). The learning process of the norms continues after the initial acquisition. Thus, the learning and the enacting of the shared pattern of practices are both essential elements to the formation and maintenance of social norms (B. Barnes, 2001, p. 25). Under these circumstances, it is still possible for individuals to resist practising the social norms, but these norms are usually taken for granted as appropriate manners by the vast majority.

Following on from the above scholarship, we may argue that social norms are deeply implicated in the operation of our everyday encounters with the outside world (Moores, 2000, 2012). While we enact in different actions to continue 'the on-going pattern of social life', social norms emerge as the appropriate patterns of practices

that we mutually agree to (B. Barnes, 2001, pp. 21–22). We usually behave in a way we deem appropriate when participating in society, without thinking reflectively about why we have to act this way. Social norms only make sense to us until we engage in the practices of these norms. Our constant and on-going practices of social norms continuously shape how we behave, helping us to achieve successful sociality when we encounter other social members (Hummon, 1991; Humphreys, 2007; Oldenburg, 1989). The above discussion of Barnes (2001), Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1986, 1990b, 1991), and Turner's (1994) approaches shows that we have to unpack the formation of social norms through detailed observation and understanding of young people's practices in their everyday lives.

### 2.3 Individualism: Entertainment and Interpersonal Communication

Following an everyday practice approach, there are two conceptual routes to study digital social norms emerging with urban Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications. The first route is to analyse these young people's everyday practices following a socio-cultural interpretation. The socio-cultural interpretation views mobile-based social networking applications, or any digital communication technologies, as cultural products – i.e. a dependent variable that is subject to the socio-cultural context (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 2). In other words, this approach suggests that the digital social norms to which particular groups of people adhere are determined by their social and cultural background. Contemporary urban Chinese young people's social and cultural background is associated with the massive changes taking place in this country in the post-reform era. Thus, the existing literature, which follows the socio-cultural interpretation, often explains the pattern of the urban Chinese younger generation's use of digital communication technologies by referring to recent social changes taking place in China (e.g. Hjorth & Gu, 2012; Liu, 2011).

In the previous chapter, I have noted the rising acceptance of individualism by urban Chinese youths. This change is associated with the economic growth of post-reform China, alongside the increase of these young people's self-reflexive capacity which emphasises the autonomy and diversity of each individual (Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014, p. 266). This rising individualism comprises important aspects of the life experiences in urban China. It certainly influences how urban Chinese youths behave in their everyday lives.

The importance of personal value is manifested in the digital social norms to which the post-90s generation Chinese college students adhere in their everyday use of digital communication technologies. A genre of scholarship, such as the work by Deluca, Brunner, and Sun (2016), Liang and Lu (2010), Lum (2006), Weber and Jia (2007), and Zittrain and Edelman (2003), focuses on the ways in which the Chinese government's internet censorship influences their practices. For instance, Liang and Lu (2010) noticed that professional Chinese internet users employ Virtual Private Network (VPN) technologies to access the Western websites or internet services (e.g. Google, Facebook, and Twitter etc.) that are technically blocked by the Chinese authorities. Many younger generation users also bypass the internet filters through 'separating characters with hyphens and commas, using English acronyms or wholesale Romanisation, or using Chinese characters with similar pronunciations to the forbidden words' (Liu, 2011, p. 40). Furthermore, in a recent research, Deluca et al. (2016) also found that WeChat and other social networking applications are used by activists to mobilise civil engagement in China. The tension between young people' desire for freedom and the government's internet censorship certainly explains particular aspects of the Chinese digital culture. However, scholars, such as Tsui (2005, p. 181) have pointed out that overemphasising this tension may fall into a Cold-War ideology, assuming that the Chinese government is an evil communist regime and that Chinese people are always opposed to this evil regime. This may lead to a falsified understanding of Chinese digital culture, wrongly interpreting the internet as a battleground where Chinese users, especially the younger generation users, to fight against the regime (Liu, 2011, p. 46).

The notion of the internet as a political battleground ignores the often apolitical nature of urban Chinese young people's everyday use of digital communication technologies, which is skewed more towards personal pleasure rather than public interests (Liu, 2011, p. 47). A series of large-scale surveys show that entertainment and interpersonal communication comprises the two most important aspects of Chinese young people's activities on the internet (CNNIC, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, Guo, 2005, 2007). For instance, a survey of 30,000 Chinese internet users conducted by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) (2014b, pp. 49–51) found that watching videos, playing computer games, and reading literature are the three major forms of recreation that occupy urban Chinese young people's daily use of the

internet. Specifically, over two-thirds of Chinese young people have watched videos, whilst approximately half of them have played games or read literature on the internet respectively (CNNIC, 2014b, pp. 49–51). The figures also indicate that a high ratio of Chinese young people access the internet for interpersonal communication purposes. More than four-fifths of Chinese internet users have sent instant messages, seven out of ten have used blogs, and almost half of them have used micro-blogging or other social networking applications (CNNIC, 2014b, pp. 46–48).

Recreation and interpersonal communication-centred practices are reflected extensively in urban Chinese young people's everyday use of WeChat and other similar mobile-based social networking applications as well. The China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) (2013, p. 19) surveyed almost 3,000 Chinese internet users and found that almost 90 per cent of WeChat users – predominately young people – use the application to send instant messages, whilst three quarters of them use Moments updates to mark their personal life episodes. In accordance with the findings of the China Internet Network Information Centre's (2013) research, Mao (2014, p. 639) conducted a survey of 181 Chinese college students from Southwest University and Chongqing Youth Vocational and Technical College and found that keeping in touch with friends, expanding social circles, and relieving stress comprise the most important aspects of these urban young people's everyday use of the application. In a similar vein, Chen (2016) conducted a more rigorous survey of 307 Chinese college students in 2014. Her research uncovers that 'recognition needs' comprise an important motive that encourages these youths to 1) post updates in 'Moments', 2) send private messages to each other, 3) create or join group chats (Chen, 2016, p. 36). Entertainment needs motivated them to browse news, paly games, and read jokes, so as to pass the time and relax (Chen, 2016, p. 36).

As Chen (2016, p. 36) notes, 'entertainment and recognition needs were central motives driving Chinese young adults to intensely and frequently use WeChat'. The above evidence exemplifies this: to analyse the digital social norms that are emerging with Chinese college students' everyday practices on WeChat, it is important to provide an account of their entertainment- and interpersonal communication-centred usage of digital communication technologies. Looking at the

subject from this personal pleasure-centred perspective, self-presentation, social network management, and social relationship development, are important dimensions of Chinese college students' everyday use of WeChat.

Following Mead (1934) and Goffman's (1959) symbolic internationalism, we are always presenting our self-images when interacting with other members of the society. This relates to a form of dramatic performance in which our identity is revealed through mobilising available symbols (Chambers, 2013, p. 62). Research has uncovered how social media provide youths with an arena for identity articulation (boyd, 2014). Through surveys and interviews of 100 British college students, Bouvier (2012, p. 37) found that these youths performed a wide range of identities through managing their Facebook profiles. For instance, in order to present their social popularity, photographs with friends were often selectively displayed on these youths' Timeline to portray the social events to which they have attended (Bouvier, 2012, p. 37). On WeChat, the original content uploaded by urban Chinese youths has similar potential. Chen (2016, p. 36) has touched upon the interplay between urban Chinese youths' self-presentation and their pattern of WeChat usage. An understanding of these youths' self-presentation practices provides an angle to analyse the digital social norms emerging with their everyday use of WeChat.

Social network management comprises another important aspect of people's mobile social media usage. In particular, for urban Chinese youths, this management not only concerns their friendship/acquaintanceship, but also their (potential) relationship with strangers. Haythornthwaite (2005, p. 137) uses 'latent ties' to explain the 'technically possible but not yet activated' connection between strangers; this 'latent' ties have potential for developing friendship/acquaintanceship. Haythornthwaite's (2005, p. 137) assertion is echoed by Morgan (2009, p. 5), who suggests that 'strangers can become acquaintances and acquaintances can become intimates'. In particular, moving far away from home to attend universities in a strange city, Chinese college students have to develop new friendships to deal with loneliness and homesickness. WeChat's stranger social plug-ins provide these youths with the opportunity to hunt for friendship in a new living environment.

However, while socialising with strangers, these youths have accept a collateral consequence. They have to make their WeChat profiles available to be accessed by

strangers. In the West, Jensen (2007), Jurgenson (2013), and Kelsey (2015) use an 'omniopticon' (or 'omnopticon') approach to analyse how users' everyday use of (mobile-based) social networking applications are influenced by 'the many watching the many' facilitated by these applications (Kelsey, 2015, p. 2; Kelsey & Bennett, 2014, p. 38). They have discovered Western users' practice of self-censorship which aims at protecting personal privacy from other users' gaze. In the Chinese context, the existing literature pays primary attention to Chinese users' self-censorship of the content that relates to the criticism of the government (Peng, 2017, p. 12). Yet, the rise of individualism in urban China causes urban youths' personal pleasure-centred everyday practice, leading to the pattern of their mobile social media usage which often features apolitical. Under these circumstances, strangers' stalking is more prominent than the government's surveillance. Hjorth and Gu (2012) and Miller et al. (2016) have analysed how urban Chinese youths' self-disclose of personal information is influenced by strangers' stalking. For instance, Miller et al. (2016, p. 189) found that personal privacy has framed a concept which was unfamiliar to Chinese people in pre-reform era but has been extensively valued by contemporary urban Chinese youths in their everyday use of mobile social media.

The above literature (Chen, 2016; Hjorth & Gu, 2012; Liu, 2011; Miller et al., 2016) has analysed how the patterns of urban Chinese youths' technology usage correspond with the rise of individualism in urban China. This individualism-based explanation of these young people's practices becomes a socio-cultural context-based interpretation of the configuration of these young people's digital social norms. The socio-cultural context-based approach to digital social norms certainly has its merits. Yet, an over-reliance on this approach fails to address how urban Chinese young people's digital social norms are peculiar to the characteristics of digital communication technologies which they use for their everyday practices. In particular, a number of scholars, such as boyd (2007, 2010), Chambers (2013), and Livingstone (2008), found that personal pleasure-centred usage, including self-expression and social network management, also comprises significant aspects of Western young generations' use of digital communication technologies. This indicates that, apart from the Chinese socio-cultural context, the characteristics of different digital communication technologies are also central to the formation of digital social norms to which urban Chinese young people adhere in their everyday use of these technologies.

## 2.4 Mediation Approach to Digital Social Norms

Mediation theory supports an analysis of the formation of digital social norms to which urban Chinese young people adhere on mobile-based social networking applications and places a particular emphasis on the characteristics of the applications. Mediation theory uses a mediation process to interpret the ways in which digital communication technologies influence young people's everyday practices of digital social norms. This approach addresses the weaknesses of two schools of thought, which follow technology-effect approach and socio-culture-effect approach respectively (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 2). The first school of thought views technology as an independent variable, while users are approached as a dependent variable influenced by technology (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 2). The technology-effect advocators, such as McLuhan and Fiore (2003), are often criticised as technological deterministic, who interpret digital communication technologies as the creators of culture; their scholarship failed to acknowledge that the technologies are also the products of the culture which are invented and used by people, subject to their social needs and desires in their everyday practices (Caron & Caronia, 2007, p. 32). Opposing technological determinism, the second school of thought – a socio-culture-effect approach – emphasises the socio-cultural construction of people's technology use (Chen, 2016). In the studies of the digital social norms emerging with Chinese younger generations' use of digital communication technologies, for example, a socio-culture-effect approach appears to be reliant on the interpretation of the Chinese socio-cultural context. This approach provides an account of the Chinese socio-cultural context, yet often fails to acknowledge the role that the materiality or functionality of technologies plays in influencing the young people's practices. The two approaches comprise two different kinds of determinism that overemphasise one set of factors while overlooking the other set. Neither helps achieve a comprehensive understanding of the formation of digital social norms.

To move beyond the limitations of technological and socio-cultural determinism, mediation (or mediatisation) theory has been developed and adopted by recent media and cultural theorists, such as Hjarvard (2013), Lievrouw (2009), and Thumim (2012). Mediation theory defines digital communication technologies as mediators of cultures and everyday practices. This refers to the ways in which young people socially adapt to the materiality – i.e. the affordances of the technologies.

Affordances are the material characteristics of technologies and natural objects, facilitating certain practices in our everyday lives (Hutchby, 2001, 2003, 2013). For instance, a bridge affords us a convenient way to across a river. Likewise, a telephone affords us a channel to talk to someone without arranging a face-to-face meeting. Digital social norms are formed through a mediation process in which the affordances of digital communication technologies continuously influence young people's everyday practices. For instance, mediation theorists, such as Thumim (2012, p. 51), are interested in exploring how meanings are socially and technologically constructed in the transmission of information through an emphasis of the different affordances of medium technologies. The affordances of a digital communication technology, thus, can be interpreted as the mode of communication that the technology facilitates (boyd, 2007; Hjarvard, 2013). For instance, politicians may choose different communication technologies, such as newspapers and personal blogs, to communicate with the general public in political campaigns (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 19). The affordances of newspapers often support one-way information dissemination, allowing a politician to address serious issues in a top-down mode. By contrast, the affordances of blogs exhibit a communicative nature, allowing the politician to communicate with the general public in a more interactive fashion (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 19).

However, mediation approach avoids technological determinism by considering people as active technology users. This approach not only attends to the ways in which affordances of digital communication technologies influence 'the message and the relationship between sender and recipient', but also scrutinises how people participate in the meaning-making practices through utilising these technological affordances (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 19). By still referring to the example of a political campaign, we can see that the relationship between politicians and the general public changes as they communicate via different technologies (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 19). The ways in which politicians continuously use newspapers to address serious issues define the affordances of the technology as a formal communication channel, allowing politicians to construct a powerful public image. Likewise, the ways in which they continuously use blogs to interact with the general public shape the affordances of the technology as a casual communication channel, allowing the politicians to project a more approachable public impression (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 19). Thus, the mediation approach helps scholars to understand how the affordances of different

digital communication technologies facilitate different modes of meaning production, as well as how people utilise these affordances for their own purposes (Madianou & Miller, 2012, 2013).

Furthermore, mediation approach also regards all digital communication technologies as an integrated structure, in which the affordances of each individual technology play certain specific roles in relation to other technologies (Madianou & Miller, 2012, p. 174). While the existing digital communication technologies always reaffirm their importance within the integrated structure, young people's use of new technologies always disputes the importance of the existing ones (Billig, 1999, p. 5). However, the new digital technologies never completely replace the old ones, but reshape the meaning of old ones in young people's practices. In the meantime, the ways in which people used the old forms of technologies in the past also helps them to learn how to use the new ones as well (Madianou & Miller, 2012, 2013). For example, letters are an old, traditional form of communication, while e-mail is a relatively new one. It becomes apparent that the ways in which we write an e-mail share many similarities with how we draft a letter. However, e-mails have never totally replaced letters but appear as an alternative (usually less formal) communication choice. We still use letters in very formal and important occasions (e.g. the exchange of credentials in diplomatic settings). The mediation process continues as the more recent digital communication technologies emerge. Young people's digital social norms, thus, are formed by the ways in which they use different communication technologies for different purposes. This multiple use is referred to as 'polymedia' by Madianou and Miller (2012, pp. 169–187).

### 2.5 Digital Social Norms and Social Networking Applications

Based on the mediation approach, we would expect that the ways in which urban Chinese young people use mobile-based social networking applications share many similar characteristics with their experiences on earlier social networking applications. There is limited literature investigating Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications. However, as previously mentioned, today's urban Chinese young people share many similar life experiences with their Western peers. Thus, a review of the studies of Western young people's use of social networking applications is thought-provoking, facilitating an understanding of the digital social norms emerging alongside Chinese college students' use of WeChat. Since the

middle of the 2000s' first decade, we have witnessed an explosive growth in the numbers of social networking application users amongst young people across the globe. Founded in 2004, Facebook took four years to achieve its first 100 million users (Facebook, 2008). Five years later, this figure increased to 1.11 billion in 2013 (The Associated Press, 2013). The growth continues. By the end of 2015, the number of monthly active Facebook users was more than 1.5 billion, which accounts for almost one-fifth of the world's population (Statista, 2016c). A similar trend can be found in other social networking applications too. For instance, the number of Twitter users dramatically increased by 17 times from 41 million in 2010 (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010) to 700 million in 2011 (Taylor, 2011). Likewise, the number of Instagram users grew approximately 300 million from 2013 to 2015 as well (Statista, 2016d). Use of these social networking applications has now become an essential part of young people's everyday lives.

Despite the various designs of social networking applications, the majority share three basic features (boyd, 2007; boyd & Ellison, 2007). These three features include: enabling users 1) to create 'a profile within a bounded system', 2) to articulate 'a list of other users with whom they share a connection', and 3) to traverse the 'list of connections' when using the applications (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). Based on these three shared features, social networking applications facilitate a many-to-many mode of communication. On Facebook, for instance, the average number of contacts that young people have in their friend list is 130 (Statistic Brain, 2015). All young people have to simultaneously cope with hundreds of friends when they upload a photograph or a personal status to their personal Timeline. A many-to-many mode of communication is in place on Facebook, influencing an important dimension of digital social norms that young people follow in their everyday use of Facebook.

Following Castells (2007, 2008, 2009), the many-to-many mode of communication emerging with young people's use of social networking applications can be described as *mass self-communication*. In the past, interpersonal communication and mass communication are usually regarded as the two main divisions of communication modes (Castells, 2009, p. 54). While interpersonal communication refers to the information exchanges between two individuals (e.g. one person talking to another), mass communication describes the information transmissions from a specific broadcaster to a number of receivers (usually from mass media to audiences)

(Price, 1998, p. 9). Unlike interpersonal communication which is of an interactive nature, mass communication tends to describe a one-directional process, as information flows are heavily controlled by the mass media (Castells, 2009, pp. 54–55). Existing somewhere between interpersonal communication and mass communication, mass self-communication emerges with the widespread penetration of social networking applications among younger generations (Castells, 2007, 2008, 2009). Mass self-communication consists of both interpersonal communication and mass communication's characteristics. On the one hand, mass self-communication is interpersonal as it features 'self-generated in content', 'self-directed in emission', and 'self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many' (Castells, 2007, p. 248). On the other hand, this mode of communication follows a mass pattern, since the information is broadcasted from a person to many audiences via the person's person-to-person networks (Castells, 2007, p. 248). Castells (2007, 2008, 2009) suggests that mass self-communication captures the ways in which information is exchanged within a community built on digital communication technology-assisted connectivity, which best describes the many-to-many mode of communication taking place amongst young people on social networking applications.

Framed within mass self-communication, boyd (2007, 2011) uses the concept of *networked public* to describe the affordances of social networking applications. Networked public affordances emphasise the open access of users' self-generated content to many audiences with whom they are connected on social networking applications, creating an imagined collectivity amongst these users when they use the applications to socialise with each other (boyd, 2011, p. 39). Networked public affordances certainly 'do not dictate participants' behaviour', but 'they do configure the environment in a way that shapes participants' engagement' (boyd, 2011, p. 39). These affordances are built upon mass self-communication, enabling users of social networking applications to act as media outlets broadcasting content of their own (boyd, 2011; Gillmor, 2004). In public sphere, the networked public affordances may explain the role that social networking applications play in the rise of citizen journalism and grassroots social movements, such as the Arabic Spring (Al Omoush, Yaseen, & Alma'aitah, 2012; Khondker, 2011; Lotan et al., 2011; Nanabhay & Farmanfarmaian, 2011; Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013). These affordances may also explain how social networking applications enhance Western young people's

sociality, mediating particular digital social norm practices in their everyday social interactions.

Three sets of digital social norms emerge as Western young people engage with the networked public on social networking applications. Firstly, these affordances of social networking applications shape these young people's self-presentation practices. Self-presentation, following Goffman's (1959) symbolic interactionism, refers to a form of stage performance-like practices. In our everyday lives, we always utilise available signs and symbols to present and manage the impression of ourselves when we interact with other social members. Self-presentation has always been a popular research topic in the studies of digital social norms on social networking applications (Lampe et al., 2007; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Sas, Dix, Hart, & Ronghui, 2009). For example, based on an observation of 63 Facebook accounts, Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008, p. 1,816) found that American college students are usually in favour of projecting their positive personal traits through uploading personal content (e.g. pictures with a crowd of friends to show social popularity). Lampe et al. (2007) and Sas et al. (2009) also discovered similar ethnographic evidence, showing how young people from other Western countries carefully design their personal profiles for the management of their self-impression on Facebook. Presenting a positive self-image allows young people to achieve self-esteem and self-actualisation, reflecting the narcissistic nature of human beings (Mehdizadeh, 2010, p. 357). These practices describe a significant dimension of young people's everyday lives, comprising certain aspects of digital social norms to which they adhere on social networking applications.

Secondly, the ways in which Western young people manage personal social networks comprise a central dimension of digital social norms related to their everyday practices of using social networking applications. Many existing studies, such as the research by West et al. (2009), confirm that social connections built on social networking applications have become an increasingly important part of young people's personal social networks in their everyday lives. West et al. (2009) interviewed a sample of 16 British undergraduate students. Their research shows that these young people may have a long list of contacts on Facebook carrying very different characteristics and sharing different social relationships with them (West et al., 2009, p. 619). However, this list of contacts almost always includes these young

people's 'close friends' in their everyday lives (West et al., 2009, p. 619). Similarly, Ellison et al. (2007) surveyed 286 undergraduate students from an American university. The findings reveal that keeping in touch with old friends at high school is an important reason why these college students use Facebook (Ellison et al., 2007, p. 1,164). As Ellison et al. (2007, p. 1,165) note,

> Online interactions do not necessarily remove people from their offline world but may indeed be used to support relationships and keep people in contact, even when life changes move them away from each other.
>
> (Ellison et al., 2007, p. 1,165)

Through a year-long ethnographic study of six participants recruited from an Australian university, Lambert (2013) found that the facilitation of social networking applications is especially important for young people when they want to sustain a social relationship with someone who has moved away from their immediate circle. This is because 'reclaiming connections' and 'sustaining connections' are two contingent processes to resolve the distance (Lambert, 2013, p. 77). A physically distanced social relationship between two young people can be reclaimed as soon as any possible connection between them is formed (e.g. to add each other as friends on Facebook), yet this relationship has to be sustained through regular interaction that maintains the activeness of the connectivity (Lambert, 2013). While physical distance may reduce the opportunity for two young people to meet up in person, social networking applications may help them to negotiate social interactions without arranging face-to-face meetings. How young people activate and sustain social connections with each other, therefore, also forms a significant dimension of digital social norms to which they adhere on social networking applications.

Networked public affordances of social networking applications, however, further complicate young people's digital social norm practices. This is because these young people have to deal with many audiences who carry dramatically different characteristics as soon as they start using social networking applications. These audiences, including close friends, casual acquaintances, parents, and relatives, may all access the personalised content that young people upload on their personal profiles. Both wanted and unwanted audiences may appear under these

circumstances, requiring young people to develop new social techniques to address the issues arising (boyd, 2014, p. 58; Chambers, 2013, p. 74). Through ethnographic research with overseas Philippine migrant workers and their left-behind children, Madianou and Miller (2013) found that young people often view their parents as unwanted audiences – i.e. those with whom they are reluctant to form connections on social networking applications. Tension arises from the dynamics between parents and offspring when Philippine left-behind children adjust their profile visibility and privacy settings to avoid revealing their everyday life episodes to their parents (Madianou & Miller, 2012, 2013). Concerns over unwanted audiences are not only peculiar to the ethnographic context of the overseas Philippine migrant workers and their left-behind children but are also shared by young people who use social networking applications across the globe. As Livingstone (2008, p. 408) noted after interviewing 16 young people from the UK, almost all users of the younger generations know that they use social networking applications 'for only part, not all, of their social relations'. They always seek out ways to manage a personal boundary on social networking applications to address the possible encounters with unwanted audiences (boyd, 2014, p. 58; Livingstone, 2008; Tufekci, 2007; West et al., 2009). This forms another important dimension of the digital social norms that are emerging with young people's use of social networking applications.

### 2.6 The Limitations of the Existing Studies of Digital Social Norms

Following the mediation approach, we find that the complex affordances of social networking applications continuously shape and reshape digital social norms peculiar to (Western) young people's use of the applications. Among the existing scholarship, the focuses typically include (1) how users practise self-presentation (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Lampe et al., 2007; Sas et al., 2009; Zhao et al., 2008); (2) how they manage and expand social networks (Ellison et al., 2007; Lambert, 2013; West et al., 2009); as well as (3) how they cope with surveillance and protect their privacy (Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007; Livingstone, 2008; Tufekci, 2007; West et al., 2009). All these studies shed light on different aspects of digital social norms, providing a glimpse into how the affordances of social networking applications influence digital social norms. While bearing in mind the rise of individualism in the Chinese socio-cultural context, I find that similar issues apply to the Chinese younger generations' use of social networking applications and other similar digital communication technologies as well (Liu, 2011). For instance, Chu and Choi (2010)

conducted a quantitative comparative study with 208 Chinese college students and 205 American college students. Their findings show that, despite the different cultural background leading to minor differences, both groups of young people present and manage positive images, whilst sharing similar epistemological understandings of personal boundary management on social networking applications (Chu & Choi, 2010). This suggests that an acknowledgement of the essential characteristics of digital communication technologies in the mediation process is also of great help in understanding Chinese young people's digital social norms.

Thus, mediation theory explains how social meanings are created and communicated in young people's use of the technology and how these refer to the material characteristics of this technology (Thumim, 2012, p. 60). This mediation approach bridges two traits: a particular digital communication technology and the digital social norms emerging in young people's use of the technology. However, there are limits associated with how mediation process is understood in existing media and cultural studies scholarship. The key term, affordances, which is often central to an understanding of how digital communication technologies mediate young people's digital social norm practices, is often misinterpreted as meaning the simple material characteristics of the technologies.

The concept of affordances was originated in Gibson's (1979) theorisation of material objects and adopted by more recent media and cultural theorists, such as Hutchby (2001, 2003, 2013) and Hjarvard (2013). Gibson's (1979) affordance theory defines that the ways in which people approach the material world reflect 'an action-oriented and practical mode' (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 27). This suggests that our everyday practices always involve how we are influenced by the material objects – i.e. the affordances of things (Hutchby, 2001, p. 447, 2003, p. 581). This expression implies that materiality is the inherent nature of a technology, while affordances are the possible usages of the materiality in users' everyday lives. In other words, the materiality is somehow fixed, while affordances are the social shaping of how we response to the materiality in our socially constructed practices. However, this understanding of affordances is incomplete, as the so-called materiality of technologies is also contextually constructed, depending upon not only how the technologies are used, but also how they are designed and manufactured and work in relation to other technologies/objects. This understanding of affordances, thus,

creates a socio-cultural/material dichotomous account of the mediation process, which concentrates on the usage of a technology in people's everyday lives without acknowledging how the technology is designed. While we can see that (mobile-based) social networking applications are launched by internet giants, it is worthwhile scrutinising how these applications are designed in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how the applications mediate digital social norms in urban Chinese young people's everyday practices.

Furthermore, by taking the materiality of digital communication technologies for granted, some mediation advocators, such as Wood and Smith (2004), create a vague dualism of mediated everyday practices and non-mediated everyday practices. For example, Wood and Smith (2004, p. 6) claimed that a central argument of mediation theory is based upon a separation of two ways of meaning-making: 'immediate communication', in which information is transmitted face-to-face, and 'mediated communication', in which messages are conveyed via digital communication technologies. Immediate communication is practised in physical space, while mediated communication is practised in a so-called 'virtual space' and characterised by the affordances of the medium – i.e. the digital communication technologies (Wood & Smith, 2004, p. 6). However, there is never such a thing as non-mediated communication. Even in a face-to-face interaction, the verbal communication between two persons is mediated through the language they speak, whilst the voice a person projects to another is dependent upon transmitting sound waves through the air. In this sense, technology-mediated communication does not define the essential characteristics of this mode of interaction but lead to an unhelpful dualism of virtual-physical-space dualism.

However, a series of studies by Rodgers, Barnett, and Cochrane (2009, 2014) indicate that media and cultural studies cannot overlook the intertwining of people's use of media technologies and their experiences of physical space. In particular, mobile-based social networking applications are used on mobile devices. When urban Chinese young people use these applications in motion, their use of the applications is constantly influenced by their bodily encounters with their surroundings, making the so-called 'mediated communication' inseparable from the physical space in which our bodies are situated. Ito's (2005) findings on Japanese teenagers' use of mobile phones provide a good illustration of how young people's

bodily encounters with their surroundings influence their social interactions facilitated by digital communication technologies. Through ethnographic interviews with 24 Japanese high school and college students, Ito (2005, p. 145) found that adults' surveillance (parents' surveillance in the home and teachers' surveillance at school) has a continuous impact on how Japanese young people communicate with their peers on mobile phones. For example, teenage couples often use mobile phones to manage intimacy after school. However, they tend to use text messages to keep in touch while committing to domestic activities in the home with other family members, such as having a meal, doing homework, and watching television (Mizuko Ito, 2005, p. 138). They only phone each other late at night when their parents are not around (Mizuko Ito, 2005, p. 138). Correspondence via text messaging is a way in which Japanese teenage couples can practise intimate communication without disrupting domestic activities in the home space (Mizuko Ito, 2005). This becomes a way of negotiating their bodily encounters with their surroundings when they are attending to a 'mediated communication'. The emerging importance of one's bodily encounters with surroundings and use of digital communication technologies exemplifies that neither the socio-culture/material dualism nor the virtual/physical dichotomy shed much light on an understanding of the digital social norms emerging with urban Chinese young people's everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications.

In recent years, we have also witnessed urban Chinese young people's reliance on mobile devices to access the internet and digital communication technologies (Liu, 2011, p. 36). In 2014, statistics show that mobile internet users accounted for over 80 per cent of the overall internet population in China, triple what it was seven years previously (CNNIC, 2014b, p. 23). Furthermore, three-thirds of new Chinese internet users mainly use mobile devices to access internet services (CNNIC, 2014b, p. 19). Urban Chinese young people's reliance on mobile internet access reflects the increasing popularity of mobile-based social networking applications, such as Weibo and WeChat in China. The use of mobile-based social networking applications is particularly important for the post-90s generation Chinese college students who left home for university in a strange city. Having moved away from the familial home, these young people not only to keep in touch with parents and former high-school mates but are also keen on developing new friendships on university campus (Hjorth & Gu, 2012; Liu, 2011). Popular mobile-based social networking applications, such

as WeChat, can be installed on mobile phones and used anytime, anywhere, facilitating these young people's sociality in their university lives. Thus, in order to understand the mediation of digital social norms to which urban Chinese young people adhere on WeChat, I develop an interdisciplinary approach which combines the strengths of affect theory/new materialism and traditional cultural studies; this bridges the theoretical gap that I have identified previously.

Specifically, affective account is used for overcoming the limitations of affordance-based mediation approach. As I will detail in Chapter 4, by affect theory, I refer to a Deleuzian perspective, emphasising how bodily encounters shape movements (Ash, 2015b, p. 84). This school of thought neither denies the agency of individual users nor overlooks the materiality of technologies. Instead, it unpacks the interplay between users and technologies by tracing how they are assembled in everyday lives. For instance, incoming instant messages may generate affects that encourage users to move their fingers so as to click on a mobile screen and then respond to it. In particular, in Chapter 4, I follow Ash (2010, 2012, 2015a), Clough (2008; 2010; 2010), and Seyfert's (2012) approach, scrutinising how both human affects and non-human affects play their parts in shaping urban Chinese young people's everyday use of WeChat.

New materialism is then used to contest the subjectivity of individuals to creatively derive the meaning from the place they reside in/strolls around and how this subjective experience of urban space shapes urban Chinese youths' use of WeChat. The new materialist approach is similar to affect theory, emphasising how social dynamics emerge with the relational and complex encounters between human bodies and technologies/objects (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 38). What makes the new materialism particularly valuable for the present research is its critique of dualism. It allows us to think beyond a virtual/physical or online/offline dualism. In the present thesis, this facilitates a dialogue between human geography/spatial studies and cultural studies (e.g. symbolic interactionism). It helps me to contextualise the discussion of urban Chinese youths' use of WeChat with an acknowledgement of their everyday experience of urban space. In the following chapters, I shall articulate how digital social norms are formed and appropriated in urban Chinese young people's everyday use of WeChat through a creative synthesis of affect theory/new materialism, and traditional cultural approaches.

## 2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I provide a critical review of two theoretical approaches that may be of help in understanding the mediation of digital social norms to which urban Chinese young people adhere in their everyday use of WeChat. The first approach refers to a socio-cultural interpretation of everyday practices and social networking application usage. Tracing the formation of digital social norms with a focus on the socio-cultural context, we may find that the ways in which urban Chinese young people use digital communication technologies reflect the rise of individualism in late-modern urban life experiences in China. This relates to how personal desire is emphasised amongst the post-90s generation urban Chinese young people – while enjoying material prosperity and Western-style consumption, urban Chinese young people are able to develop their capacity for self-reflexivity. This encourages them to pursue their personal desires, becoming a critical factor influencing these young people's entertainment and interpersonal communication-centred use of digital communication technologies. The importance of entertainment and interpersonal communication in their use of digital communication technologies is a starting point to understanding the digital social norms emerging with Chinese college students' practices on WeChat.

The socio-cultural approach to digital social norms has merits. However, it fails to acknowledge the particularity of each digital communication technology. In the second part, therefore, I provide a critical review of how digital social norms are formed in urban Chinese young people's use of WeChat through an understanding of how the mobile-based social networking applications mediate their everyday practices. This refers to how the specific characteristics of the applications influence these young person's specific modes of behaviours. As the review shows, the networked public affordances of social networking applications both facilitate and require young people to practise self-presentation (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Lampe et al., 2007; Sas et al., 2009; Zhao et al., 2008), manage and expand personal social networks (Ellison et al., 2007; Lambert, 2013; West et al., 2009), and simultaneously cope with surveillance by other users (Dwyer et al., 2007; Livingstone, 2008; Tufekci, 2007; West et al., 2009). The findings are also thought-provoking, shedding light on an understanding of digital social norms peculiar to Chinese college students' use of WeChat.

However, as I have also pointed out in this chapter, the mediation theory still has weaknesses. The concept of affordances, which is extensively used in the existing mediation literature, is often misinterpreted and reproduces an unhelpful socio-cultural/material dichotomous understanding of the characteristics of a digital communication technology. This, furthermore, often leads to virtual/physical space dualism in the studies of digital social norms and digital communication technologies as well. My critical view of the socio-cultural context interpretation and the mediation approach, both of which are widely used in the existing literature, is that both have unique merits and weaknesses in addressing the formation of digital social norms. This motivates me to develop interdisciplinary approaches that synthesise affect theory/new materialism and traditional cultural approaches to bridge this theoretical gap. Through engaging with the empirical data gathered from my case study of Chinese college students' use of WeChat, I shall examine how urban Chinese young people use mobile-based social networking applications and how their practices relate to their everyday life experiences. In the following chapter, I shall firstly explain how I conducted my empirical study through a netnographic method.

# Chapter 3. Methodology – A Netnographic Method:

## How Empirical Data Were Collected in the Present Research and What Methodological Issues Emerge with this Research Method

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodological approach I have chosen to undertake the empirical study for the present research; that is, a study of emerging digital social norms adopted by Chinese young people who use mobile-based social networking applications. Methodological issues are important because only appropriate research methods enable researchers to gather valuable empirical data. These data allow them to justify the existing theories and develop new theoretical approaches for their research context. In media and cultural studies, many scholars, such as Buffardi and Campbell (2008) Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2011), Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini (2007), and Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008), employ quantitative research methods to inquire about young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications or other digital communication technologies. For instance, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2011) conducted a large-scale survey of 450 American college students to study how they use Facebook to manage social capital. This genre of studies is interested in seeking the representative patterns of practices emerging with people's use of digital communication technologies. Although undoubtedly useful, this approach may overlook certain incidents that the researchers' hypotheses did not take into consideration (Bryman, 2004).

By contrast, another genre of studies, such as the work by Hjorth and Gu (2012), Humphreys (2007), Lambert (2013), Sas, Dix, Hart, and Ronghui (2009), uses qualitative research methods – especially ethnographic methods – to inquire into the details of how young people use emerging digital communication technologies in their everyday lives. This ethnographic method is particularly helpful to enquiries about digital social norms emerging with young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications because these technologies are different from those of previous generations in many ways; indeed, new practices of users often appear that researchers cannot foresee unless going to the field. As the research focus of my thesis is to enquire into urban Chinese young people's use of WeChat, I use the netnographic method, an emerging ethnographic method undertaken with the

facilitation of digital communication technologies (Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2010, 2015). This method allows researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' use of mobile-based social networking applications by observing user-generated content and by interacting with participants.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, Chinese college students are representative of Chinese young people living in urban cities and are leading the trend of mobile-based social networking use in the East Asian country. For this reason, I sampled my participants from a chosen university (Xiamen University) in Southeast China. Located in the Southeast costal area – one of the most developed regions in China – the university is a popular destination for higher education, attracting students from all over the country. The university was chosen because, given the diversity of its student community and the courses that it offers, it is typical of contemporary Chinese universities. The present netnographic empirical data collection was conducted between July 2014 and July 2015 with 19 college students from the chosen university. I added the participants as friends on WeChat, so as to observe their user-generated content and arrange individual interviews (including both face-to-face interviews and informal instant-message interviews) with each of them. The duration of the netnographic enquiry was approximately 12 months. The enriched empirical data that I gathered enabled me to inquire into the mediation of digital social norms in relation to these young people's use of the mobile-based social networking application in their everyday lives.

### 3.2 Sampling and Participant Recruitments

The sampled 19 student participants, including eight men and eleven women, are volunteers who study at the chosen university. These students are all undergraduates ranging from Year 1 to Year 4, aged between 18 and 23. They come from different parts of China (e.g. Fujian, Guangdong, Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Inner Mongolia etc.), and study different subjects at the university (e.g. Business, Engineering, and English literature etc.). Some of the participants are relatively quiet, while some others have more active personality. All the participants have a personal account on WeChat, although the frequency of their use of this mobile-based social networking application varies. They represent a wide range of characteristics regarding both their personal characteristics and their patterns of everyday WeChat usage. This variety ensures that my research findings are empirically rich, reflecting

and capturing the complexity and nuances of different types of Chinese college students and their use of WeChat.

In order to recruit my research participants, I firstly contacted the chosen university's student affairs office and then obtained permission to conduct my research with the university's students from the university's student affairs department. I then distributed an advertisement of research participant recruitment, alongside a questionnaire of a survey to students via e-mail[5]. The survey, however, was not used for my empirical analysis presented in the later chapters[6]. It served merely as a pilot study, helping me gain a preliminary understanding of the popularity of WeChat amongst students at the university. A university official, who was assigned as the gatekeeper, provided me all necessary help and guidance – including access to the e-mail list of all registered students at the university. The participant recruitment advertisement was constructed by myself, on behalf of myself, and explained that the research was a voluntary basis. The recruitment advertisement and pilot questionnaire were distributed to all 16,400 undergraduate students of the university (the male/female ratio is approximately 1 to 1.15). A total of 317 students responded to the survey, 140 of them provided their contact details and said that they are willing to participate in my further research. I then e-mailed the 140 participants to briefly introduce my research plan to them. Through email correspondence, 19 volunteers confirmed that they would participate in my netnographic research. I arranged meetings with each of the 19 volunteers. I explained the details of my netnographic study, including how I would gather empirical data from their personal WeChat account and what risks may be involved if they participated in the research. I also clarified that they were free to withdraw at any time and any stage of the research. I asked the participants to sign and date an information sheet and a consent form as proof. All the procedures that I followed were approved by Newcastle University's Research Ethics Committee, ensuring that the 19 students' participation in my research was of a voluntary nature.

[5] The questionnaire and participant recruitment advertisement were written in both Chinese and English. For details of the recruitment advertisement and the questionnaire please see Appendix A.
[6] As previously mentioned, this is because the nature of the present netnographic research studies is qualitative. It enquires into the detailed incidences in urban Chinese young people's everyday use of WeChat rather than the representativeness of their practices on the mobile-based social networking application.

The present netnographic research consists of both digital communication technology-assisted observations and interviews. I signed up for a WeChat account, namely 'WeChat Research Account', for observation purposes. I asked my participants to add the research account as friends on WeChat and requested permission to access their WeChat Moments. I observed and analysed the archives of these participants' WeChat Moments updates to understand how they use this mobile-based social networking application in their everyday lives. Furthermore, I also conducted individual interviews[7] with each of the research participants at places near the campus (usually coffee shops) where they felt comfortable. I asked them questions about how and why they used WeChat in particular ways according to the outcomes of my observations. My netnographic enquiry continued for approximately a year. During this period of time, I constantly observed what my participants shared in their WeChat Moments and asked them new questions (via WeChat instant messages) when issues emerged. I immersed myself into the fieldwork and developed a good rapport with my participants during the year-long research process. The students were patient and supportive. Most of them saw me as a trustworthy friend rather than a researcher and were willing to answer my detailed questions. This enabled me to become a member of their peer community and allowed me to achieve a comprehensive understanding of their use of WeChat. As soon as my data collection completed, I sent a message to notify the participants that they could un-friend the research account[8]. The enriched empirical data that I gathered through my netnographic enquiry practice formed a solid foundation that helped me provide a comprehensive analysis of digital social norms emerging with urban Chinese young people's use of WeChat.

### 3.3 Research Questions

Conducting the present empirical study, my research design is framed by the research questions of my thesis. As I mentioned in the introduction and developed through the previous chapter, my thesis analyses the mediation of digital social norms emerging with urban Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications. While Chinese college students are typical of the Chinese young people living in urban cities, the empirical study looks into sampled Chinese

[7] The interviews were conducted in Chinese. The transcripts have been translated into English when they appear in the analysis in my thesis.
[8] However, many of them did not unfriend me and keep in touch with me on WeChat until now.

college students' use of WeChat with a specific focus on four important issues respectively: 1) the reasoning behind popularity of WeChat, 2) urban Chinese youths' self-presentation practices on the application, 3) their use of the application for social relationship management, and 4) their privacy concerns in their everyday use of the applications. To understand how WeChat has become so popular amongst urban Chinese young people, I analysed the design of the application and observed how the design affects these young people's practices. To understand how self-presentation is practised on WeChat, I observed the content my Chinese college student participants shared and interviewed them about why they uploaded the content through the application. Conducting a netnographic method which incorporates digital communication technology-assisted observations and individual interviews help me gather useful data to answer the question. In order to find out about my participants' everyday use of WeChat for social relationship management, a netnographic method allowed me to interact with them, asking questions about how they manage and expand social networks through the technology. This mode of data collection applies to my enquiry about how urban Chinese young people cope with the possible surveillance by the unwelcomed others they encounter on WeChat.

By using the netnographic research method, I observed how these Chinese college student participants used WeChat on an everyday basis and examined the detailed reasons behind their everyday use of the technology. I did this by thematically categorising[9] and analysing a mixture of the different types of quality data gathered. I observed many interesting incidents that exemplify my Chinese college student participants' digital social norm practices in their everyday use of WeChat – the kinds that are very difficult to find without the facilitation of long-time observation and continuous interaction. In the following sections, I specifically address four issues to elaborate how the netnographic method enhanced my empirical research:

(1) What the nature of a netnographic enquiry is.

(2) How to make cultural entrée in a netnographic enquiry practice.

[9] The categorisation of data was based on the research questions that I have previously introduced.

(3) How to use netnographic research method to collect and analyse empirical data.

(4) What ethical issues emerge with the execution of the netnographic method and how to address these issues in research practices.

### 3.4 The Epistemology of Netnography

As previously mentioned, netnography is a form of ethnography which incorporates digital communication technologies into fieldwork (Jupp, 2006, p. 193; Rokka, 2010, p. 383). It is an emerging qualitative and interpretive research method which adapts the ethnographic techniques of anthropology to inquire into cultures, especially the digital cultures now emerging with people's everyday use of digital communication technologies (Jupp, 2006, p. 193). As a research method, netnography was originally conceptualised by Kozinets (1997, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2010), but similar modes of academic enquiry practices can be found in earlier scholarship, such as the work by Correll (1995), Marcus (1994), and Turkle (1995). Even though netnography was initially used as a new ethnographic marketing research tool, it has become an increasingly influential research method across disciplines in humanities and social sciences (Kozinets, 2006b; McMahan, 2003).

Netnography develops ethnographic research methods (Kozinets, 2010, pp. 58–59). Differing from typical quantitative research methods such as large-scale surveys, an ethnographic enquiry does not seek representativeness in research findings. Instead, ethnographers are interested in the detailed and contextual interpretations of the subjects that they choose to study (Hobbs, 2006; Wolcott, 1990, 2002). The origins of the ethnographic method can be traced to the Chicago School theorists, such as Cayton (1993) and Whyte (2012), who emphasise the detailed understanding of people's everyday lives in cultural studies. The epistemology of ethnography is that, in order to understand a specific culture, researchers are expected to develop an in-depth understanding of the culture or social setting in which their research subjects reside (Hobbs, 2006). This requires the researchers to immerse themselves in the culture or social settings, becoming a member of the community and using their acuity as an essential research instrument (Sherry, 1991, p. 572, 1995, p. 173). In other words, the researchers have to engage with the research participants so as to make sense of them and their everyday lives. Grounded in the epistemology, an

ethnographic enquiry practice typically includes the employment of a mixture of qualitative data collection methods which enable the researchers to observe and participate in the activities in which the research participants engage every day (Hobbs, 2006, p. 101). Participant observation often appears as a major element of the methodology in an ethnographic enquiry (Kozinets, 2010, 2015). Yet the other qualitative methods, such as 'interviews, conversational and discourse analysis, documentary analysis, film, and photography' are all available to be used as well (Hobbs, 2006, p. 101).

In particular, participant observation is a crucial data collection approach in ethnographic enquiries (Kozinets, 2010). Unlike passive observation – in which researchers act in a bystander role – conducting participant observation requires researchers to be more active, not only observing but also engaging in the activities of their research participants (Richard, Chambers, Raghuram, & Tincknell, 2004, p. 209). In other words, researchers of participant observation should make efforts to become a member of the group to which their research participants belong. They have to maintain regular contact with the participants in order to develop a rapport with them. This helps the researchers to gain trust from the participants, encouraging them to share the very details of their everyday lives (Tedlock, 1991). Two types of participant observation – declared and undeclared – can be used for ethnographic enquiry practices (Pomeroy, 1994). Researchers do not declare their data collection when engaging with research participants in an undeclared participant observation (Pomeroy, 1994, p. 129). This approach has unique merits in that it minimises the risk of the researchers' presence influencing the participants' behaviours, as the participants are not aware of being observed (Pomeroy, 1994, p. 129). However, this approach is also morally questionable and may cause research ethical issues. This is because the participants are unable to object to the data collection when they are not willing to be observed. Declared participant observation, in which participants are fully aware of the observational data collection, is, therefore, used more frequently by ethnographers who are concerned about their research participants' well-being[10] (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010; Li, 2008).

[10] For details please also see the latter section on Ethical Issues.

Mobile-based social networking applications – or any digital communication technologies – do not create a virtual space that acts as a binary opposite to physical space (Ash, 2015b; Dourish, 2006). Thus, a netnographic enquiry does not mean using digital communication technologies to observe people's practices in the so-called 'virtual space' but refers to the ethnographic enquiry of the cultures with a particular focus on people's use of digital communication technologies in their everyday lives. While sharing the same research epistemology, netnography is a form of ethnographic enquiry, but the research subjects are closely connected with research participants' use of digital communication technologies, and the data collection relies heavily on the assistance of the internet and the associated digital communication technologies (Kozinets, 2010, p. 68). This is the opportunity that the digital era provides for today's humanities and social science researchers (Rice & Rogers, 1984, p. 82).

Built upon ethnography, a netnographic enquiry allows the researchers to gather ethnographic empirical data by using digital communication technologies. Researchers are able to observe and interact with participants without constantly arranging meetings in a mutually agreed particular space (Kozinets, 2010). In my fieldwork, for example, I arranged meetings with my participants in order to obtain their permissions, develop rapport with them, and conduct interviews with them. However, my data collection was not terminated as soon as the initial interviews were completed. Instead, valuable data were accumulated through my continuous observations of the content that my participants generated in their WeChat Moments and my recurrent interactions with them through the correspondence of WeChat instant messages. With my research practice, collecting empirical data with the assistance of digital communication technologies had two notable advantages. On the one hand, it would simply be too costly and unrealistic to stay on the university campus for up to a year and observe how my participants use WeChat every day. On the other hand, the nature of the data being gathered also suited my research focus, because the object of the research is to study digital social norms emerging with Chinese college students' use of WeChat rather than the students per se. The employment of WeChat as a data collection tool, therefore, provided an efficient way to gather the first-hand data of how my participants engaged in using WeChat through continuous observation of the digital content that they generate on an everyday basis.

While providing new opportunities, the employment of a netnographic method is also challenging, as the nature of ethnographic research practices changes with the digital communication technology-assisted data collection. In netnographic research practices, participant observation is based upon the collection of the data that research participants share on the internet via digital communication technologies (Kozinets, 2002). Similar to Mead (1934) and Goffman's (1959, 1963, 1967) symbolic interactionist approach, netnography studies people's acts and behaviours rather than them per se as the 'ultimate unit of analysis' (Kozinets, 2002, p. 64). In other words, the observation of research participants' interactions is essential for an understanding of the digital culture that a netnographic researcher studies. While the content that users generate captures how they interact with other users in their everyday use of digital communication technologies, this content becomes an essential source of the empirical data for a netnographic enquiry practice (Kozinets, 2006b, p. 130). A netnographic researcher has to sign up for a personal account to become a member of the digital culture community. In doing so, he or she is able to engage in a mode of ethnographic enquiry practice, observing the other members of the community in order to gain a detailed understanding of the digital culture (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60). For instance, Sandlin (2007, p. 291) undertook a netnographic enquiry to explore 'how does Budget Living[11] teach its readers to be consumers'. She achieved the research aim by observing the conversations on the magazine's online discussion board rather than interviewing the magazine's readers (Sandlin, 2007). In a similar vein, Lambert (2013) conducted a netnographic enquiry into Facebook users' management of intimacy. The data were collected through a combination of observations and interactions with the recruited participants via a research Facebook account that he constructed (Lambert, 2013, pp. 50–56). Both case studies are a good example of the execution of netnographic enquiries.

Through my employment of the netnographic research method, I gathered sufficient valuable data that captured and described how Chinese college students interact and socialise via WeChat in their everyday lives. With a focus on methodology, I learned that, as Kozinets (2002, p. 63) asserts, netnography is a research method that is 'inherently flexible and adaptable' to the interests and abilities of researchers.

[11] Budget Living is bimonthly published popular culture budget-oriented lifestyle magazine (Sandlin, 2007, p. 291).

The method is particular valuable for a digital culture researcher to gather first-hand and enriched empirical data on how participants use digital communication technologies. In my research practice, the empirical data help analyse how particular digital social norms are formed and practised in Chinese college students' everyday use of the technology. However, I also confronted parallel methodological issues as I went along in my year-long netnographic research journey with my participants. The issues, respectively, included (1) making research entrée, (2) gathering and analysing empirical data, and (3) committing to ethical research practices, which have been thematically conceptualised in Kozinets' (2001, 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2010) scholarship. In the following sections, I demonstrate how I address these issues in my case study of Chinese college students' use of WeChat.

### 3.5 Preparatory Phase – Making Culture Entrée

I found that the establishment of open-ended research questions is fundamental to the preparatory phase of a netnographic research design. In the previous chapters, I have identified that the spatial experiences involved in Chinese college students' everyday use of mobile-based social networking application are central to a comprehensive understanding of how these digital social norms are formed. My empirical case study should, therefore, help me find out how my participants use the technology with a particular focus on their spatial experiences. These spatial experiences refer to my participants' mobility and locality while using the technology in their everyday lives. The aim of the empirical case study, however, cannot be achieved unless I immerse myself in the field with a clear understanding of what dimensions of the participants' practices are relevant to my research focus. I, therefore, developed a series of research questions to guide my fieldwork. As previously mentioned, these research questions broadly included: (1) How do Chinese college students use WeChat to practise self-presentation? (2) How do they use the technologies to manage and develop social networks? (3) How do they cope with surveillance when using the technologies? Each of these research questions is open-ended and pays attention to a particular aspect of my participants' everyday use of WeChat. These questions helped to identify the particular digital social norms emerging through their technology use.

Entering the field with research questions is a prerequisite to designing a quality netnographic enquiry because the research questions help researchers make

cultural entrée to the field (Kozinets, 2002, 2006b, 2010). By developing research questions that inform the debates of the 'central phenomenon or concept', researchers are able to identify what might be of interest to their enquiry practices (Creswell, 2009, pp. 129–130). Nevertheless, these research questions should not define the very extent to which a netnographic enquiry explores. Instead, they only provide guidance that facilitates 'a more exploratory approach that suits the novel context of internet cultures and communities' (Kozinets, 2010, p. 80). In my empirical case study, the netnographic enquiry helped me uncover a wide range of social processes involved in Chinese college students' use of WeChat. These included not only how the mobile-based social networking application influences and affects their ritual behaviours but also how the technology is used by my participants in accordance with their personalised understanding of the appropriateness of norms[12]. While both individual and shared practices emerged with my participants' digital social norm practices, neither aspect should be overlooked in the netnographic enquiry practice.

However, the notion of cultural entrée held by Kozinets (1997, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2010, 2015) and Sandlin (2007), often reproduces a vague dualistic separation between the virtual and the physical. For instance, Kozinets (2010, pp. 63–65) claimed that netnography may be employed to study the cultures of both 'online communities' and 'communities online'. He further explained that the culture of 'online communities' refers to the social phenomena occurring in purely online registers, typically including issues associated with online identity and digital communication technology-mediated interactions (Kozinets, 2010, pp. 63–65). On the other hand, the culture of 'communities online' is connected with the social phenomena extending 'beyond the internet and online interaction', typically including how offline practices are shaped and defined by digital communication technology-mediated interactions (Kozinets, 2010, pp. 63–65).

In terms of the netnographic enquiry of communities online, Kozinets (2010) took his empirical case study of the fan culture of a science-fiction television series – Star Trek. In this case, Kozinets (2010, p. 64) scrutinised 'the wider phenomenon of Star Trek culture and more generally, how fan cultures and communities created and

[12] For details please see the latter chapters.

distributed alternative meanings and social structures relating to commercial production'. While the research focus is an 'offline community', the empirical data collected via digital communication technologies are supplementary to those gathered via other 'offline' means (Kozinets, 2010, p. 64). In order to elaborate on the features of online communities' netnography, Kozinets (2010) then refers to Baym's (2000) empirical case study of internet users' discussions in a Usenet newsgroup about a soap opera - rec.arts.tv.soaps. Baym (2000) completed the empirical data collection through remote observations and interactions in the online forum with members of the chosen Usenet newsgroup. The data being analysed were the user-generated content she copied from the online forum (Bury, 2000). Kozinets (2010, pp. 63–65) defined this mode of netnographic research as the enquiry of 'online communities', which acts as a binary opposite to the enquiry of 'communities online'.

However, as I have addressed in the previous chapters, online/offline dichotomy does not describe the inherent differences between people's digital communication technology use and everyday lives. Instead, it reproduces a vague and unhelpful virtual/physical space dualism. The virtual/physical space dualism emerges, because both academics (Fiedler, Haruvy, & Li, 2011; Kozinets, 2010; Markham, 1998) and ordinary people usually take for granted the spatial logic in our everyday use of digital communication technologies. In the past, digital communication technologies were used on relatively fixed devices, such as desktop or laptop computers (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012). The interactions with our immediate surroundings did not have a significant impact on our technology-mediated practices. Nevertheless, the emergence of the mobile-based social networking applications, including WeChat, enables users to engage social networking technology anytime anywhere even while in motion (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012; Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011; Lindqvist, Cranshaw, Wiese, Hong, & Zimmerman, 2011). These technologies serve as interfaces that facilitate the interactions between users and their immediate surroundings[13].

Moving beyond this virtual/physical space dualism, researchers have to be fully aware that there is no need to create a dualistic separation of 'online communities'

[13] For details please see Chapter 5 – Self-Presentation and Personalisation of Space.

and ‘communities online’ when making the cultural entrée in a netnographic enquiry practice. The digital cultures explored in a netnographic enquiry are always a part of research participants’ everyday cultures. Thus, the design of a netnographic study has to be dynamic and flexible, subject to the contextual nature of the research subjects. The data collection may incorporate both digital communication technology-assisted observation and interaction alongside other traditional ethnographic approaches to enrich the empirical data (Kozinets, 2010). While acknowledging that the cultural entrée influences the data collection and analysis in a netnographic research, in the following section, I address the methodological issues emerging with the empirical data collection and analysis of netnography.

### 3.6 Executional Phase – Data Collection and Analysis

As a cultural entrée, I employed declared participant observation as the data collection instrument, and gathered and analysed three types of empirical data in my netnographic empirical case study of Chinese college students’ use of WeChat. The first type is comprised of the archives of user-generated content copied from my student participants’ personal accounts, including the textual and graphical updates, as well as location check-ins, that they uploaded in their WeChat Moments. These archives are the original data which clearly describe what content the participants generate and circulate via WeChat, capturing an important dimension of their use of the mobile-based social networking application in their everyday lives. I gathered this type of empirical data via signing up for a research WeChat account, adding the participants as friends, and observing their WeChat Moments updates. I used screenshots to archive the content generated and circulated by my college student participants on WeChat. The archives provide first-hand knowledge of the participants’ everyday practices on the mobile-based social networking application.

The second type of empirical data comprises transcripts that record the interactions between me and my student participants, comprising both (a) formal interviews and (b) informal interactions. The formal interviews refer to the one-off interviews that I arranged with my participants in person, while the informal interactions consist of the recurrent instant message-assisted correspondence between us throughout the year-long netnographic enquiry. These are elicited data that I and the 19 recruited Chinese college students co-created via interpersonal interactions. These data are co-created, because the creation of the data was of an interactive nature, involving

both the researcher's and the participants' inputs. Through these interactions, my subjective assumptions of why my participants used WeChat in particular modes were to be endorsed or questioned by the answers that they provided. Furthermore, my questions also stimulated the participants to reflect on their behaviours, encouraging them to provide answers on the reasons behind their everyday routines of WeChat use which were even taken for granted by the participants themselves. The co-created data enabled me to gain a further and more in-depth understanding of how and why my participants used WeChat in particular modes. In addition to the above two categories, I also took field notes while observing and interacting with my participants. These field notes reflected my emerging thoughts as my netnographic enquiry went on during the year. They formed my preliminary analysis of the above two types of empirical data conducted during my fieldwork, archiving the development of my thinking throughout the journey of my netnography. The three types of netnographic empirical data were systematically triangulated and analysed in accordance with the open-ended research questions which I have developed previously.

As the above discussion shows, I immersed myself in the field by acting as a participant, using a declared participant observation method to collect and analyse my empirical data. It became apparent that my subjectivity was acknowledged in the empirical data collection through the participant observation. The use of participant observation as a research instrument refers to both pragmatist and formalist epistemology to social enquiries in humanities and social sciences. Following pragmatism, people's everyday practices of any kind are viewed as both progressive and incremental (Rock, 1979). This school of thought emphasises that everyday lives are of an unstructured nature that is dynamic and constantly changing (May, 2011, p. 163). Hence, to inquire about people's everyday practices, researchers have to become a part of the everyday lives so as to observe, experience, and understand the dynamics and changes. Similarly, formalism suggests that relations between individuals always share certain intrinsic similarities, despite the fact that representations of these relations may be very different from one and another in their everyday lives (May, 2011, p. 164). Thus, this tradition focuses on investigating the interactions between people rather than people per se (May, 2011). Based upon the two epistemological approaches to knowledge, participant observation has developed as a data collection and analysis instrument in humanities and social

sciences (May, 2011) and has been adapted by netnographic researchers to inquire about digital cultures (Kozinets, 2006a, 2006b, 2010). The 'process of understanding action' by acting as a participant is central to the implementation of participant observations but is usually omitted in other types of research methods (May, 2011, p. 169). In my netnographic enquiry practice, I found that this action helped me to avoid imposing my own social experience and personal understanding onto the research practices. It enabled me to minimise the effects of my bias and prejudice on the subject matters – my participants' everyday use of WeChat (May, 2011, p. 169).

I emphasise the use of declared participant observation as the instrument of data collection and analysis in my research practice. This is because the netnographic method might be incorrectly interpreted as the analysis of the content that research participants provide on the internet. The participant observation in a netnographic enquiry refers to the collection and analysis of user-generated content emerging with research participants' everyday use of digital communication technologies. However, the extent of the user-generated content should not be misleading or only used to describe the content generated by research participants. For example, Langer and Beckman (2005, p. 193) claimed that the data collection and analysis via a netnographic observation is similar to a traditional content analysis. This suggests that a netnographic researcher only acts as a collector of the content generated by research participants and that his or her analysis is solely based upon the user-generated content. Langer and Beckman's (2005) approach to netnographic data collection and analysis is insufficient, failing to acknowledge the participatory nature of the research observation (Kozinets, 2010, p. 97). In other words, it omits the social contact between researchers and participants, which allows the researchers to experience and thereby gain a deeper understanding of the digital cultures that they are investigating. Reflecting on my enquiry practice, this relates to incorporating the empirical data co-created by me and my Chinese college student participants throughout the year-long continuous interactions via WeChat.

Interactions between researchers and participants are central to the data collection and analysis in a netnographic enquiry. This is because the participation of researchers in the digital cultures that they inquire into is also vital. As Kozinets (2006b, pp. 132 & 134) notes, a netnographic enquiry should not 'be tied too closely with any one particular method of data collection and analysis', but placed in 'the

middle-range on the participation-observational axis'. This means that the netnographic data collection and analysis should include the transcripts of the digital communication technology-assisted interactions between researchers and participants as well. Firstly, through interacting with participants, netnographic researchers are able to experience the digital culture in person. This sheds new light on the subject matter that they inquire into. Furthermore, the continuous interactions also function as a way to gain trust from participants. This trust encourages the participants to be more willing to share their detailed everyday lives. This, again, helps the researchers to seek for deeper knowledge about the research subjects. In my empirical data collection, for instance, I conducted both formal in-person interviews and informal instant messaging correspondences to communicate with my Chinese college student participants. The transcripts, alongside field notes of the interactions, provided numerous enriched empirical data for analysis. In particular, the instant messaging correspondence with my participants served as a participatory experience of the Chinese college students' use of WeChat. More importantly, it was also a chat-style interaction, enabling me to approach the participants with mutual trust. This helped me truly immerse myself in the field to understand my research participants and their everyday use of WeChat.

In particular, what makes the netnographic method useful for my study is the enrichment of the empirical data gathered. The enrichment of data benefits from the triangulation of different types of empirical data collected via different research instruments. Triangulation, also known as a multi-method approach, refers to the employment of more than one data collection instruments in a research enquiry (Bell, 1999; Bryman, 2004). Triangulation is not a simple addition of data categories. The data are enriched by the systematic triangulation of different types of empirical data, which brings out different characteristics. On the one hand, each type of data has its own unique strengths in disturbing or unveiling particular aspects of research subject matters (Bryman, 2004, pp. 7–9). This provides a comprehensive understanding of the issues being investigated. On the other hand, each type of data also supplements the other's weaknesses, helping achieve a higher level of confidence in research findings (Bryman, 2004, p. 275). As the above discussion shows, I captured my Chinese college students' everyday use of WeChat through archiving the content that they shared in WeChat Moments. My assumptions of the reasons behind the participants' particular modes of behaviours were to be endorsed or challenged by

approaching my participants in person for their answers. Yet, new questions also emerged through the interactions with my participants. I then returned to the observation phase to search for hints and evidence from the archives of their everyday practices on the mobile-based social networking application. The dynamic loop of data triangulation in my netnographic enquiry practice significantly enriched the empirical data that I gathered and analysed. This enabled me to minimise my subjective bias on the subject matter and achieve a high level of confidence in my research findings.

### 3.7 Ethical Issues

The execution of a quality academic research project is not only about producing sophisticated analysis; it also involves committing to ethical research practices. In particular, the employment of the netnographic enquiry method raises ethical issues in relation to the participants' privacy and right to know when participating in an enquiry practice. In order to address my research participants' right to know, I firstly approached the university attended by my research participants for the institution's endorsement of my research project. Specifically, the recruitment of my Chinese college student participants was approved by the university's student affairs office and was undertaken under a student affairs official's gatekeeping. I designed an information sheet which I asked the recruited students to sign before participating in the research. The information sheet explained the aims and procedures of my research project, including the purpose of the research, how the research would be conducted, how I would access their WeChat Moments, what data they would be providing, as well as how long the research project would last etc.[14]. It also informed the participants that the research was of a voluntary nature and that they were free to withdraw at any stage without being penalised. I also orally explained the above terms to the students and did not ask them to sign the information sheet until they indicated that they fully understood.

I also drew up a consent form[15], which confirmed that the participants had been fully informed about the nature of their participation in my research practice and agreed to all the terms listed on the information sheet. The consent form was given to the participants after they had read the information sheet. The recruited students were

[14] For details please see Appendix B for the Information Sheet.
[15] For details please see Appendix C for the Consent Form.

not allowed to participate in the research project until they signed the consent form. In addition, the initial meeting at which the participants signed the two forms was individually and respectively arranged at a place near the campus that my participants chose and felt comfortable with. The terms were explained to them in a clear and concise way. The procedures to which I adhered guaranteed that all my participants fully understood the process and the voluntary nature of their research participation. Most importantly, they recognised that their WeChat Moments updates and instant message correspondence with me would be archived and transcribed for the sake of my netnographic enquiry. In addition, I did not share any of my original data with other researchers, apart from the examples attached in Appendix D[16].

In my netnographic enquiry, I made every effort to ensure that my research participants understand that I would have access to the content that they generated in WeChat Moments. This guaranteed that the moral dimension of my research practice was in accordance with the participatory nature of netnographic observation (Kozinets, 2015). I acknowledge that undeclared participant observation may have merit in that it minimises researchers' interference on data collection. However, since netnographic empirical data also involve researchers and participants' co-creation, this merit is not highly desirable, because researchers' interference is an essential part of the data collection anyway. Furthermore, the undeclared participant observation possibly violates participants' right to know, which leads to ethical risks that netnographic researchers must seek to avoid. Undeclared participant observation might sometimes be employed – because researchers, such as Langer and Beckman (2005), have wrongly interpreted the netnographic method as a mode of digital content analysis. They defined the internet as a public environment (Langer & Beckman, 2005). Netnographic observation refers to the observation of the publically available user-generated content (Kozinets, 2010). A netnographic researcher, therefore, is free to collect and analyse this kind of content without asking permission from the producers of the content. However, Langer and Beckman's (2005) viewpoint is problematic, because users may have various understandings of the nature of their digital communication technology usage. It is undeniable that different social networking applications may have different privacy policies. However, generating publically accessible content does not mean that the

[16] I shared my field notes with my supervisors with my research participants' permissions.

users are willing to share this content with anybody for any reason. Much literature, such as the work by Chambers (2013), Livingstone (2008), Karl and Peluchette (2011), illustrates that people are usually concerned about their encounters with 'unwanted audiences', despite their willingness to share personal content on social networking applications. For instance, Karl and Peluchette (2011) conducted a survey of 208 American college students. Their findings indicate that these young people usually viewed professors or teachers as 'unwanted audiences' of their personal Facebook accounts.

Unlike previous netnographic researchers, such as Langer and Beckman (2005), I acknowledge the complexity of young people's everyday use of digital communication technologies. I argue that to what extent netnographic participants are willing to share their user-generated content for the purposes of academic enquiry is questionable, despite the fact that the content might be accessible to researchers without requesting permission. This is particularly true of my netnographic enquiry practice in relation to WeChat – the digital communication technology through which I gathered empirical data is a popular form of mobile-based social networking application. Almost all of my netnographic research participants use it on an everyday basis, generating and sharing enormous amounts of personal data for their own social purposes. These comprise their profiles, selfies, personal life episodes, alongside everyday routines and locations[17]. I could not have guaranteed that they would allow me to access this information and translate their everyday use of the technology into academic context unless I notified them of my presence as a netnographic researcher. Through requesting permission to observe and interact with my participants, I ensured that all the recruited students fully understood the nature of my observation and their participation in the netnographic enquiry.

Requesting research participants' permission is another important dimension of ethical netnographic enquiry practices. By approaching participants without requesting permissions, netnographic researchers might be unable to identify what kinds of user-generated content the participants were not willing to share. This leads to the risk of breaching the participants' right of privacy. In this sense, Langer and

[17] For more details please also see Chapter 7 – Spatial Privacy and Spatial Collateral Surveillance.

Beckman's (2005) research can be seen as a lesson in poor netnographic enquiry practice. Langer and Beckman (2005) conducted a netnographic enquiry on Danish cosmetic surgery bulletin boards. To some extent, the research topic is sensitive as an inappropriate presentation of the research findings might reveal private information that research participants do not wish to be known by other people. However, rather than anonymising the research participants, Langer and Beckman (2005) directly copied their nicknames on the online forum and presented them in the article as a part of their empirical evidence. Furthermore, as Kozinets (2010) criticises, the presentation of empirical data even revealed some of the participants' personal e-mail addresses and telephone numbers (Langer & Beckman, 2005, p. 197). In this case, regarding the internet and digital communication technologies as publically available data sources, the researchers did not contact participants for permissions and, therefore, were not aware that the data they accessed were personal and confidential. Their netnographic research findings incorrectly presented this information, leading to the risks of revealing participants' personal information to unauthorised parties.

In order to avoid risking issues of confidentiality, I followed Kozinets (2015) and Newcastle University's Research Ethics Committee's advice, using a specific strategy to ensure that my participants' personal information could not be identified by other people. Firstly, I informed my participants of the anonymous nature of their research participation and anonymised their personal information by issuing them with pseudonyms as soon as the permissions to access their WeChat account were granted. The pseudonyms not only appear in the presentation of my research findings in this thesis but are also used throughout my year-long netnographic fieldwork with the 19 Chinese college students. For example, I used the pseudonyms to mark my participants on WeChat in order to replace their nicknames shown on the research account. In the meantime, I only used the pseudonyms to address the participants when referring to their names in the transcripts of my netnographic observations and interactions, as well as my field notes. The use of the pseudonyms throughout the data storage and the preliminary data analysis protected the confidentiality of my participants' personal information. Moreover, during the fieldwork, I always notified the participants that the conversations between us would be archived and used for my research purposes, and also informed them that they could request that I destroy any part of the archives if they were unhappy with the

record. Furthermore, I also described my research participants by informing them of my preliminary research findings. Each of the debriefings was individually undertaken through WeChat instant message correspondence and covered only the findings relating to the participant who I was debriefing. I informed the participants that they could request that I withdraw any part of the findings that they did not wish to appear in my thesis. By following the above procedures, I ensured that my participants' privacy was respected and protected. In this way, I am committing to the academic research ethics of undertaking a quality netnographic enquiry, minimising the unnecessary moral risks found in some netnographic enquiry practices.

### 3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained how I gathered empirical data throughout my year-long netnographic enquiry with my present Chinese college student participants and what methodological issues emerge when using netnography as a research method. To sum up, my netnographic enquiry practice incorporates three data collection and analysis instruments, including WeChat-assisted, declared participant observations, continuous interactions (both in-person and WeChat assisted), as well as field notes. Specifically, I signed up for a WeChat research account to observe my participants' WeChat Moments. I engaged with my participants both in-person and through WeChat instant messages. While the observations allowed me access to the participants' visible and detailed everyday practices in WeChat Moments, the interactions enabled me to gain comprehensive and in-depth understandings of the motives and reasons behind their practices. Furthermore, I also drafted field notes to reflect my thoughts during the fieldwork. The field notes serve as the preliminary analysis of the former two types of data, helping me approach the research subjects by using my acuity as a research instrument. These three data collection techniques generated three distinctive types of ethnographic empirical data, providing different angles from which to approach the mediation of the digital social norms to which urban Chinese young people adhere in their everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications.

In the course of conducting my netnographic enquiry, I also encountered some methodological issues. These issues, broadly, comprise three aspects, namely, (1) how to make cultural entrée in the preparatory phase, (2) how to collect and analyse empirical data in the executional phase, and (3) how to ensure that ethical practices

are pursued throughout the netnographic enquiry. In order to address the cultural entrée, a netnographic researcher has to develop a preliminary understanding of the research subjects and go to the field with questions based upon that preliminary understanding. The cultural entrée helps the researcher to develop acuity, enabling him or her to be sensitive to the relevant phenomena emerging in the fieldwork (Kozinets, 2006b, 2010, 2015). This is reflected in the cultural entrée of my empirical case study, and is related to the development of the three research questions that were borne in mind all the way throughout the fieldwork. As far as the executional phase is concerned, netnographic empirical data collection and analysis, while of an ethnographical nature, should incorporate both observations and interactions with research participants (Kozinets, 2006b, 2010, 2015). In particular, in my practice, the data co-created by me and participants through interactions significantly enriched my empirical data, helping me to gain a deeper understanding of my research subjects in the context of my participants' everyday use of WeChat. These, alongside the field notes reflecting the development of my thinking during the fieldwork, helped build up my findings of the technology-assisted observations. However, the use of netnography as a research method also leads to ethical issues (Bruckman, 2006). The research's ethics-related issues refer to the risks of revealing research participants' personal information to irrelevant bodies. In order to address these issues, I informed my participants about the details of my research process and the possible risks. I anonymised my participants, not only in the presentation of my findings but also throughout the data storage and data analysis.

By committing to the above practice, my netnographic fieldwork generated an enormous amount of high-quality, ethically-gathered empirical data. In the latter chapters, I thematically present my findings through the analysis of my empirical data and critically inform a dialogue with the empirical data and the theoretical approach that I construct in the previous chapters. This helps me to analyse the mediation of digital social norms emerging with Chinese young people's use of WeChat in their everyday lives in urban cities, following the order of my research questions – (1) How and why has WeChat become popular amongst urban Chinese young people? (2) How do these young people use WeChat to practise self-presentation? (3) How do they use these applications to manage and develop social networks? (4) How do they cope with surveillance when using these applications?

# Chapter 4. A Synthesis of Affect Theory and Everyday Practice

## Scope:

How WeChat Has Become Increasingly Influential in Urban Chinese Young People's Everyday Lives

### 4.1 Introduction

A technology has to be accepted by its users so as to make an impact on their everyday practices. The role that WeChat plays in the mediation of urban Chinese youths' digital social norms is grounded on these youths' acceptance of this application. To analyse urban Chinese youths' acceptance of WeChat, this chapter uses an interdisciplinary approach which traces how affects shape urban Chinese youths' body movement with a consideration of these youths' urban life experiences. By affects, I refer to affect theory, which is advocated by a large number of scholars, including Ash (2010, 2012, 2015a), Blackman (2012, 2013), Clough (2008; 2010; 2010), Cote (2014), Dean (2004, 2005, 2010), Featherstone (2010), Hansen (2006; 2004), Massumi (2002), Parisi (2013), and Thacker (2004). Affects are the effects of encounters among different bodies (Ash, 2015a, pp. 84–85; Patricia Ticineto Clough, 2010, pp. 224–225). An affect requires bodies to generate an affective response, which opens up the body to new capacities for action (Blackman, 2013, p. 186; Massumi, 2002, p. 25). An affective account of digital social norms helps articulate how the action of human bodies is continuously shaped and reshaped when they use digital communication technologies. In particular, this account unveils the ways in which a mobile-based social networking application magnifies its impact on people's everyday practices and thereby becomes an important mediator of digital social norms.

A key contribution that the affective account makes to the studies of (digital) social norms is the critique of reducing everyday practices to a merely discursive level. By emphasising the encounters between human bodies and objects, this approach pays attention to the physical and socio-cultural entwined nature of social norms. This approach overcomes the weaknesses of the affordance-based interpretation by also scrutinising the design of technologies; it avoids a social/material dichotomist understanding of the process of mediation.

To make my argument explicit, I follow Dean (2010) to analyse how mobile-based social networking applications and similar kinds of digital communication technologies form affective networks in which affects are generated and circulated. The affective design of the mobile-based social networking applications encourages urban Chinese young people's desire for attention. This tempts them to pay constant attention to the affective networks so as to be affected. Paying constant attention to the technologies addresses these young people's desire for attentive affects, making the use of the technologies an important dimension of their everyday lives. The importance is the foundation that enables the technology to mediate urban Chinese young people's everyday practices, shaping the digital social norms to which they adhere. Chinese college students are representative of the urban Chinese younger generation who lead the trend in the use of mobile-based social networking applications, such as WeChat. In order to unpack the above issues, I shall discuss the following three salient points by drawing upon the empirical evidence gathered through my year-long netnographic enquiry with Chinese college students:

(1) How urban Chinese young people's bodily encounters with mobile-based social networking applications generate affects and how the affective design amplifies the affectivity of the applications.

(2) How mobile-based social networking applications form affective networks that constantly attempt to capture urban Chinese young people's attention, mediating the digital social norms to which they adhere in their everyday lives.

(3) How to conceptualise affects and how the mediation of digital social norms can be understood by following a synthesis of affective account and everyday practice scope.

### 4.2 The Conceptualisation of Affects

The influential media and cultural theorist, Everett Rogers (2010), developed *diffusion* theory to analyse how a new digital communication technology enters into people's everyday lives. The theory divides the members of social groups into five types of technology adopters: namely, innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 2010, p. 150). Diffusion, then, is a process by which use of the technology is communicated over time among these adopters used by

them in their everyday lives (Wei & Zhang, 2008, p. 170). Diffusion theory studies technology consumption by taking users' agency and social needs into account (Lim, 2008, p. 194). Following diffusion theory, Lin and Li (2014, pp. 16–17), for instance, surveyed 280 Chinese users aged between 18 and 30, identifying that the enhancement of sociality with peers comprises an important reason explaining these young people's adoption of WeChat and similar mobile-based social networking applications.

Diffusion theory departs from the technological determinism, following a socio-cultural interpretation to address young people's acceptance of a digital communication technology. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, this approach has weaknesses as it overlooks the socio-cultural and material entwined nature of people's acceptance and everyday use of a digital communication technology. To address the theoretical gap, an interdisciplinary approach which combines affective account and socio-cultural interpretation is used to articulate the ways in which urban Chinese young people adopt WeChat in their everyday lives through an understanding of how this mobile-based social networking application circulates attentive affects.

In general, affect theory does not seek a new way to bridge socio-culture and materiality (Patricia T. Clough, 2010; Patricia Ticineto Clough, 2010; M. B. Hansen, 2006; Mark B. Hansen, 2004; Massumi, 2002; Parisi, 2013; Thacker, 2004; Wetherell, 2012). This genre of scholarship does not deny user agency. Instead, it moves beyond creating a human/technology or culture/object dichotomy by following Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) emphasis of the encounters between different bodies, and argues for an affective account of the 'general modes of influence, movement and change' in people's everyday life experiences (Wetherell, 2012, p. 2). This school of thought avoids ideas of placing socio-culture over materiality of any kind which has been so predominant in contemporary media and cultural studies. It helps unpack the complexity and interweaving of the relationships between users, digital communication technologies, other non-human objects, and their everyday practices, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of emerging digital social norms.

The conceptualisation of affects in contemporary affect studies is more or less built upon the contributions of psychology, neuroscience, as well as the 'sociology of

emotion' approach to affect (Seyfert, 2012, p. 28; Wetherell, 2012, p. 2). For example, the term affect is usually employed by psychologists and neuroscientists in order to study emotional states, as well as the unique perturbation that they cause in the human bodies and minds (Wetherell, 2012, p. 2). Affects, in this sense, are opposed to 'feelings' or any other kinds of 'elaborated subjective experience' (Wetherell, 2012, p. 2). Based on this notion, sociology of emotion further conceptualises affects as a form of social feeling that is independent of and by no means determined by discursive practices (Blackman, 2013, pp. 207–208; Wetherell, 2012, pp. 44–46). In other words, affects are considered to be unconscious or at least preconscious (Blackman, 2013, pp. 207–208; Wetherell, 2012, pp. 44–46). They are never solely located within a specific body, but always emerge as the effects of encounters between different bodies (Seyfert, 2012, p. 28). For instance, people may start crying without a clear understanding of why it happens when they are listening to a sad funeral song or watching a tragic movie. We can explain that these people cry because they are deeply affected by the music or the film. The emotion of sadness is a conscious reflection of their affective experience (i.e. crying). The conceptualisation of affect in the sociology of emotion helps us to trace the ways in which people's emotional states are influenced by the outside world (Wetherell, 2012, p. 2). As Crossley (2013, p. 139) notes,

> Habitus implies a flexible disposition which, though pre-reflective, remains commensurate with purposive action and in no way precludes intelligence, understanding, strategy or knowledge on the part of the actor.
>
> (Crossley, 2013, p. 139)

Departing from the 'sociology of emotion', which narrowly focuses on the connections between affects and human beings' emotional states, contemporary affect studies scrutinise the 'general modes of influence, movement and change' in the material world (Patricia T. Clough, 2010, p. 207; Wetherell, 2012, p. 2). The theorisation of affects in broader affect studies follows a Deleuzian perspective, defining an affect as the effect of an encounter between two bodies (Ash, 2010, p. 657; Derrida, 2002, p. 62). Contemporary affect studies do not deny the interplay between affects and emotions in human bodies; however, they focus on how human-technology encounters generate affects and then shape people's everyday practices.

We certainly have to acknowledge that different approaches to affects are employed in contemporary affect studies. One genre of scholarship uses the concept of affect to overcome the cultural determinism reflected in previous discourse studies. For instance, Kelsey (2015, p. 3) and Wetherell (2012, p. 19) argue that the relationship between discourse and affects is of an interactive nature. While discourse often 'makes affect powerful', and 'provides the means to make affect travel', it is also affected by 'the feelings, emotions, minds, ideologies and interactive experiences' that people have in their everyday lives (Kelsey, 2015, pp. 2–3). This genre of scholarship is devoted to articulating how technology use makes a difference in shaping people's agency, perceptions, and actions (Kelsey, 2015, p. 3). This approach is suitable for the studies of the interplay between technologies and everyday practices following a critical discourse studies tradition.

Different from Wetherell (2012, p. 19) and Kelsey (2015, p. 3), many other affect theorists, such as Ash (2010, 2012, 2015a), Clough (2008; 2010; 2010), and Seyfert (2012), advocate a non-representation-based approach to affective practices. Their approach extensively widens the scope that the concept of body covers (Seyfert, 2012, pp. 28–29). This concept of body is abstract enough to scrutinise not only organic bodies but also nonorganic ones (Blackman, 2012, p. 5). In other words, affects are defined as the outcome of the encounters between any kinds of bodies, including not only human bodies but also technologies and other material objects (Adey et al., 2013, p. 301; Anderson, 2009, p. 80; Thrift, Greco, & Stenner, 2004, p. 62). While the 'sociology of emotion' implies that the ability to be affected is exclusively applicable to human bodies, affect studies relate this ability to all kinds of bodies, including either organic, inorganic, artificial, or even imaginary ones (Seyfert, 2012, p. 28). For example, a plant is affected by air, water, and nutrition in soil, which lead to its growth (Ash, 2015a, p. 84). Likewise, the moon is affected by the sun and the earth, which causes its rotation, revolution, and eclipse. This non-representation approach helps analyse how our everyday practices are affected by scrutinising both human-technology and technology-technology encounters. This approach is suitable for the present study because it helps uncover how users' adoption and usage of a specific technology with a focus on both the design of the technology and its relation to other technologies.

Following this extended conceptualisation of the body, affects are understood as both organically and inorganically organised. A separate account of organically affects and inorganically organised affects is unhelpful because biology and technology are always interrelated through a variety of forms of affective practices (Ash, 2015a, pp. 85–86; Kinsley, 2010, p. 2,771). As Clough (2008, p. 9) and Thacker (2004, p. 12) argue, to be human is to be immersed in an environment full of technical affects. Our everyday practices always involve encounters with natural materials and artificial technologies, which continually and constantly shape/reshape the movement of our bodies. In human history, the emergence of new technologies in primitive society, such as making a fire so as to process raw ingredients, affected human bodies, leading to an increase in brain size (Gorman, 2008, pp. 102–105). The changes in human bodies, therefore, encouraged further development of technology, which generated inorganically organised affects (Stiegler, 1998, p. 2). With a focus on digital communication technologies, an incoming message, for example, may generate an affect, encouraging users to move their fingers to click on a mobile screen so as to respond to it as well. In this sense, affects are the results of the encounters between different bodies, which require the bodies' responses and, ultimately, influence their movements (Ash, 2015a, p. 84; Patricia Ticineto Clough, 2010, pp. 224–225). While affects can be both organically and inorganically organised, the ways in which human bodies are affected, therefore, are related to a cultural and material entwined process through which their social natures are never independent of their physical natures and vice versa.

To address the connections between affects and digital social norms, Ash (2015a, p. 84) advocates two key concepts – (1) material thresholds and (2) associated environment. While material thresholds define the capacity of a technology to produce affects, an associated environment is an environment in which the affects are transmitted (Ash, 2015a, p. 86). The material thresholds of a technology are dependent upon its materiality, whilst the associated environment refers to its relations with other relevant material. For example, a key is made from metal in a unique shape, which allows it to open (i.e. affect) a lock (Guattari, 1995, p. 43). The material thresholds of the key, including its proper material and shape, determine what and how the technology can be used. However, the affects of the key can only make sense when it is used to unlock a lock (Guattari, 1995, pp. 43–44). Likewise, a tablet computer is made of a screen, enclosures, antennae, and other electronic

components. These material thresholds of the tablet computer determine that it may facilitate users surfing the internet (Ash, 2015a, p. 84). However, this affect only emerges when the device is connected with internet service providers through Wireless Fidelity (Wi-Fi). The cooperation of keys and locks, as well as that among tablet computers, service providers, and Wireless Fidelity provide examples of the 'broader ecology of technical objects', explaining the associated environment in which a technology is situated (Ash, 2014, p. 87).

The synthesis of affective account and everyday practice scope provides a framework which facilitates an in-depth analysis of how digital communication technologies, such as mobile-based social networking applications, mediate the digital social norms to which Chinese young people adhere in their everyday lives. Specifically, the ways in which a mobile-based social networking application influences these young people's everyday practices are not through its fixed materiality, but via the affects emerging in the relational encounters between their bodies, the technology, and the other technologies/objects that are present or fail to be present in the encounters. The modes of these users' everyday practices, which reflect digital social norms, are consequences of the relational encounters in which a generation and a circulation of affects occur (Dean, 2010, pp. 91–126). Based upon the affective account, the following section draws upon my netnographic enquiry with Chinese college students, sketching out how the design of mobile-based social networking applications persuades Chinese young people to engage with the use of the applications and how digital social norms are produced in relation to the design.

### 4.3 Affective Design and Attentive Affect

Examining mobile-based social networking applications through an affective lens, it can be seen that the applications mediate digital social norms via generating affective responses from users. These affects are a key factor in how and why mobile-based social networking applications have become popular amongst urban Chinese young people and, in turn, explain how and why these applications manifest strong influences on their everyday practices. Attentive affect, which leads to capturing people's attention, is probably the most notable form emerging in the encounters between users and mobile-based social networking applications. On WeChat, for instance, an incoming message from friends may generate an attentive affect, tempting Chinese young people into paying attention to WeChat. The

attentive affects emerge when these young people engaged in using the mobile-based social networking application explain how their use of the application becomes ubiquitous. These young people's ubiquitous usage of the application is the prerequisite that allows the application to influence their everyday practices and, thereby, mediate the digital social norms to which they adhere. Attention is the result of capturing and holding one's perception or the flow of his or her consciousness (Ash, 2012, p. 8; Davenport & Beck, 2013, p. 21; Stiegler, 2010b, p. 18). Davenport and Beck (2013) define six basic units of attention that comprise three sets of paired poles: (1) captive and voluntary, (2) aversive and attractive, as well as (3) front-of-mind and back-of-mind. The first two units of attention refer to our choices, involving our desire to approach or to distance ourselves from a particular item (Davenport & Beck, 2013, p. 22). While we pay voluntary attention to something that is innately interesting to us, we may have to pay captive attention to other things that are thrust upon us as well (Davenport & Beck, 2013, pp. 22–23). For example, we may pay voluntary attention to a video clip that we want to watch, whilst paying captive attention to the advertisements in the first place. The second two units refer to what Davenport and Deck (2013, p. 23) term 'carrot-and-stick motivation'. In other words, we pay attractive attention to an item in order to gain a pleasing experience, whereas we may pay aversive attention to other items to avoid having a negative experience (Davenport & Beck, 2013, p. 23). For instance, we may pay attention to our Facebook news feed when waiting in a queue, and use this as a way to detract our attention from our boredom. The third set of two units refers to simultaneous front-of-mind and back-of-mind attentive practices (Davenport & Beck, 2013, p. 23). While walking in a crowded street, we pay highly focused attention to messaging a friend while simultaneously paying back-of-mind attention to listening to other pedestrians' conversations.

Grasping people's attention, attentive affects are generated through a complex process, which is initiated by the encounter between one's body and the outside world (Ash, 2012; Stiegler, 2010a, 2010b). According to Stiegler (2010b, p. 18), the complex process that generates attention consist of three inseparable phases, including 'primary retention', 'secondary retention', and 'projection of protentions'. The primary retention comes directly from the encounters between our bodies and apparent objects which are tenable to us but seem to be independent of our subjectivity. In the meantime, the primary retention is simultaneously conditioned by

the secondary retention, which refers to our experience of the present attentive consciousness (Stiegler, 2010b, p. 18). Furthermore, while certain primary retentions and related secondary retentions are connected, our consciousness projects protentions as anticipation (Stiegler, 2010b, p. 18). Our past and present attentive experiences shape the projection of protentions, which ultimately results in the continuation of our attention (Ash, 2012, p. 8; Stiegler, 2010b, p. 18). For instance, we may notice an incoming message when alerted by a ring tone. This then recalls our knowledge and past experience with mobile messaging. As a consequence, we start paying attention to the message, so as to move our fingers to reply it. Our attentive practices can only be activated when the three phases are connected through the encounters between our bodies and the external material environment. Digital social norms can be produced when our social encounters via digital communication technologies (e.g. WeChat) continuously lead to our attentive practices.

In order to produce the digital social norms to which Chinese young people adhere on mobile-based social networking applications, the applications mediate these young people's everyday practices via generating attentive affects and, thereby, encouraging their attentive practices. This increases the amount of time that they spend on the applications and consequently maximises the applications' influence on their everyday lives. Chinese young people's desire for attentive affects encouraged by mobile-based social networking applications is one of the main reasons why they constantly log in to their personal accounts to check what is going on. This desire, for example, tempts young people into taking out their mobile phone as an acceptable and increasingly normalised pattern of practice among today's younger generations across the globe (Pirillo, 2011). To encourage users' desire for attentive affects, the affective design of a mobile-based social networking application is crucial because the affective capacity of the application, to a certain extent, is defined by how it is affectively designed.

Affective design amplifies a mobile-based social networking application's capacity to encourage young people's desire for attentive affects. In the past, the affective design was used to describe the aesthetic or material design of a product which indirectly generates certain affects to grasp users' attention (Ash, 2012, p. 4; Shaviro, 2010, p. 3). However, the importance of affective design is shared across almost all

industries in contemporary society (Thrift, 2006). Any product has to be designed and manufactured to tempt the senses, so as to become desirable for consumers (Berlant, 2008; Featherstone, 2010). Although the designers do not have complete control over how their products are used by individual users, they are able to narrow down 'the possibilities for the kinds of affective responses that are generated' (Ash, 2012, p. 6). As Thrift (2006, p. 288) points out, in auto manufacture, for instance, 'car doors are designed to give a satisfyingly solid clunk as they shut' and 'new cars are given distinct smells'. Likewise, video games are designed to provide special visual experiences that attract players to pay particular attention to the screen (Ash, 2012, p. 5). The affective design is the material threshold that the designers impose upon their product to amplify its capacity for affect production.

In common with other industries, the affective design of mobile-based social networking applications attempts to amplify the technologies' affective capacity in influencing users, with a particular focus on encouraging users' constant attention. This helps a mobile-based social networking application to develop continuous and sustainable influences on Chinese young people's everyday practices – shaping the application into an important mediator of digital social norms. The affective design of a mobile-based social networking application is reflected in functional features and interfaces of the application. In particular, 1) instant messaging, 2) stranger social plug-ins, and 3) Moments are the most important elements of WeChat that are designed to capture and hold users' attention.

### 4.3.1 *Instant Messaging*

Scrutinising the historical development of WeChat, the technology was initially launched as an instant messaging service, similar to WhatsApp in the West (Kevin, 2012). The experience of using WeChat at that time was similar to mobile messaging. A user could exchange text or voice messages with either a contact or a group of contacts (J. Huang, 2012). Figure 1 is a screenshot of the oldest version of WeChat Graphical User Interface (GUI). Dialogue boxes were used as the main page when a user clicked to access WeChat. The attentive affects for users were generated as soon as they received messages from their contacts. In particular, a red bubble with a number appeared in the top right corner of a dialogue box, indicating the number of messages received. This, alongside a vibration and tone, notified users of incoming messages, seducing their senses and thereby driving their attention to the

application. Many of my participants noted that the first thing they do when they wake up is to check their mobile phones to see whether they have received messages from friends on WeChat. Their practices provide a good illustration of how the design of WeChat attracts young people to pay attention via its instant messaging service.

Figure 1. WeChat Graphical User Interface First Page - Oldest Version

Retrieved From (Tencent, 2011)

However, Tencent, the internet giant that launched WeChat, soon realised that the affective capacity of the application was inadequate as it did not attract as many Chinese young people as expected (Kevin, 2012). Thus, while maintaining the instant messaging function (Figure 2), a series of additional affectively-designed features were applied in the updated versions (see Figure 3). These features, for instance, include stranger social plug-ins, which facilitate users to find and communicate with people previously unknown to them. On WeChat, these include: (1) ‘Look Around’, allowing users to find others who live geographically close to them; (2) ‘Shake’, enabling users to find others who are shaking their mobile simultaneously; and (3) ‘Drift Bottle’, facilitating users to send a short message randomly to another (WeChat, n.d.-a). While also addressing certain social needs, these new features increase the application’s capacity to attract Chinese young

people’s attention when they click on the application. This encourages these young people to spend more time on using it.

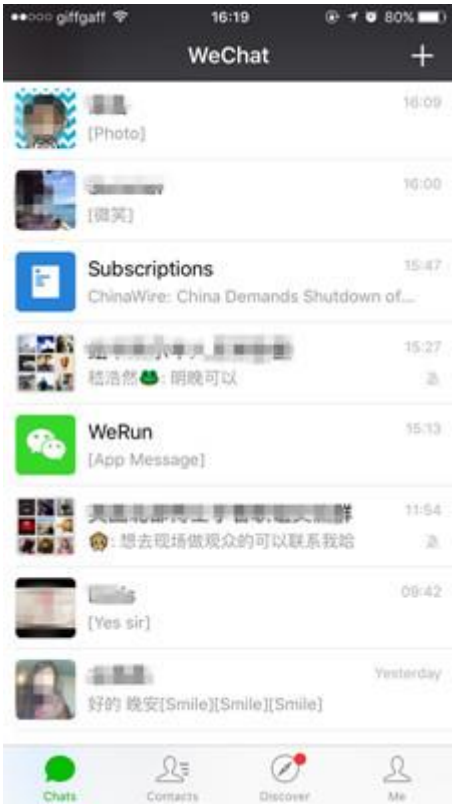

Figure 2. WeChat Graphical User Interface First Page - Latest Version

Figure 3. New Affectively Designed Features

### 4.3.2 *Stranger Social Plug-Ins*

One way in which WeChat encourages Chinese young people's desire for attentive affects is manifested in how they are encouraged to spend time using stranger social plug-ins. The present netnographic enquiry found that many participants started using the plug-ins for developing friendships, but ended up finding these as an ideal way to cope with boredom[18]. For instance, participant Zuo is a student whose hometown is not far away from her university. However, entering university is the first time the 20-year-old has lived without her parents. Zuo said that she sometimes feels bored – often late at night – because has no one to talk to. Since the launch of 'People Nearby' on WeChat, Zuo started using the plug-in to facilitate strangers to find and communicate with her. However, she soon became fed up with this 'game' after having been disturbed by many individuals whom she describes as 'annoying guys'. Zuo admitted that she still occasionally uses 'People Nearby' to find other people on WeChat and observe the Moments updates they share[19]. However, she rarely accepts friend requests from strangers anymore. As she noted,

> I do not add any strangers because it is only a way to kill the time for me… I only (use 'People Nearby' to) check who is around and what they are doing – when I have nothing to do… This helps distract my attention when I am really bored.
>
> Zuo

WeChat's stranger social plug-ins simply provide Zuo with a way to pass the time when a feeling of boredom surfaces. Similar experiences were found in the interviews with other participants too, such as Ning. The 19-year-old uses all the aforementioned stranger social plug-ins, with the intention of developing new friendships after moving away from her hometown for a university. Ning said that she has communicated with up to 100 strangers during the past year, but only a couple have become friends, remaining in contact with him until now. Ning believes that new friends might be made via stranger social plug-ins, despite realising the chance is

[18] This does not mean friendship can never be developed by using stranger social plug-Ins. For details please see Chapter 6 – Spatial Proximity and Encounters with Strangers.

[19] Moments updates are the stream-based content that users share on WeChat (see Figure 4). Users' ten most recent updates are accessible to other users when they are found via 'People Nearby'.

often slim. The imagined benefits of using these plug-ins have been tempting him to spend too much precious time on WeChat.

> I sometimes spend half an hour or more checking others' profiles or picking up 'Drift Bottles'… I guess I have to invest time to find them ('real friends')… Probably the time I spent was not always worthwhile (because no many 'real friends' were made), but at least these (the stranger social plug-ins) help me cope with my boredom.
>
> Ning

WeChat's stranger social plug-ins enable users to search for and communicate with strangers, potentially helping them to expand their social networks. Although the above examples show that the chance is sometimes slim, the present participants still spend time using the plug-ins, describing them as ways to 'cope with boredom'. This demonstrates that the plug-ins also encourage users' desire for attentive affects and that WeChat positions itself as an accessible way to address this desire. While driving users' attention from elsewhere, the plug-ins comprise an important dimension of the affective design which amplifies WeChat's affective capacity.

#### 4.3.3 *WeChat Moments*

Furthermore, a key feature of the updated versions of WeChat is the 'Moments' function (Kevin, 2012). This function enables users to generate original content, sharing everyday life episodes with friends as updates on the application (see Figure 4). If a user uploads a Moments update, it will appear in his or her contacts' Moments streams (similar to a Facebook news feed). Connecting with hundreds of contacts, the Moments updates serve up a steady flow of content, making constant demands on the users' attention. In addition, a red dot appears on the screen as soon as any update is made by users' WeChat contacts (see the red dot on 'Discovery' in Figure 2). The red dot further amplifies the affectivity of the content, encouraging users to click on it to check what new updates are available. In my netnographic enquiry, almost all participants rated Moments as one of the most attractive features of WeChat.

Figure 4. WeChat Moments

Moments serves to address users' curiosity about friends and acquaintances' personal lives. Many participants' hometowns are far away from the university. They upload Moments updates to share personal life episodes with old friends, whilst simultaneously browsing old friends' streams to keep informed about their latest news. For instance, more than half of participant Euc's WeChat contacts are people known to him before he entered university. While Euc shares Moments updates that describe his personal life episodes, the Moments updates that these old friends generate also provide a glimpse into their lives. As CNNIC's (2014a) survey shows, friends and acquaintances comprise 70 to 90 per cent of a typical user's WeChat contacts. The use of Moments as a way to be informed about friends' recent news is common among WeChat users. However, having been using Moments for over two years, participant Euc also noted that he seems to become 'addicted' to Moments.

> Sometimes it is difficult to stop spending time on WeChat… It is like compulsiveness really… You feel that (you) have to click on Moments to eliminate the 'annoying' red dot (see Figure 2)… When clicking on the red dot, your friends' Moments updates appear – Okay, so why not spend some time browsing what they share?
>
> Euc

Like Euc, other participants also mentioned how Moments increases the amount of time they spend on WeChat. Many described browsing WeChat Moments as the 'first thing they do every day after waking up', as well as a 'daily habit when they are travelling on public transport'. Furthermore, in order to encourage users to spend more time on using Moments, WeChat also allows them to react to the updates – an update is ready to receive comments and like-tags from users' WeChat contacts as soon as it is generated. When users' updates receive a comment or a like-tag, they are notified with a red numeral icon indicating the volume of reactions received from their contacts (see Figure 3 and Figure 5). Research indicates that users of (mobile-based) social networking applications are often keen to receive comments and like-tags from their contacts because the volume of these reactions accumulated is considered to be an indicator of one's popularity among friends (Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, & Campbell, 2012). Users' desire for reactions from their contacts, which echoes the narcissistic nature of human beings, is shared across nations and social groups, and is especially applicable to younger generations (Gentile et al., 2012, p. 1,929). This is reflected in the present netnographic enquiry, by the increasing amount of time that my participants spend on browsing Moments content as they are tempted to constantly send/receive comments and like-tags to/from each other. Participant Chen, a heavy WeChat user who has been using Moments since its launch, feels as if the commenting and like-tagging function is effectively 'forcing' her to spend more time on browsing Moments content because she does not want to miss any close friends' reactions to her updates.


Figure 5. Comments and Like Tags on Moments Updates

The above additional affective design effectively amplifies the affectivity of browsing Moments updates. This, to a certain extent, explains the use of WeChat while travelling a popular practice among almost all my participants. Chen said that Moments has even caused her minor traffic accidents. Once, walking while using WeChat in a street, Chen's attention was fully occupied by her friends' Moments updates, therefore, did not notice a bicyclist coming towards her. The accident left a tiny scar on Chen's arm, reminding her to be more cautious. However, she confessed that she still occasionally takes a glance of Moments when walking alone in the street. This is a kind of 'compulsiveness', as Chen and many of her peers said. The above examples clearly indicate that, while representing a useful channel that enables users to stay up to date with friends' and acquaintances' latest news, Moments at the same time also distracts my participants' attention, rendering them unable to leave WeChat.

Being endued with affective capacity, WeChat succeeds in attracting Chinese young people's attention. Reflecting my own empirical findings, Mao (2014) conducted a survey of 189 Chinese college students from two higher education institutions in the Southwest China. The researcher's preliminary statistical analysis show that almost

all of his student participants have a WeChat account, with more than 80 per cent using the technology on an everyday basis (Mao, 2014, p. 637). These students access WeChat, not only because the application allows them to communicate, but also because they can browse the content circulated on the application to pass the time. The circulation of the content serves as attentive affects that constantly grasp these young people's attention, becoming a practice with which they engage in order to cope with boredom in their everyday lives. Born in the 1990s, Chinese college students are typical of the post-reform Chinese younger generation[20]. As mentioned in Chapter 1 and 2, having been brought up in one-child families, these students share close relationships with their parents and schoolmates (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 702). Entering university is probably the first time that most of them have ever experienced living in a new environment without parents and close friends accompanying them. Loneliness and homesickness are new life experiences that these young people encounter. While they seek attentive affects to help deal with these new experiences, WeChat is affectively designed, so as to address and even encourage their desire in this respect.

The affective design of WeChat captures urban Chinese young people's attention by feeding them a long list of digital content, including instant messages, strangers' user profiles, friends' stream-based updates, as well as their comments and like tags. All these different types of content reach these young people as soon as they pick up their mobile devices and access the mobile-based social networking application. The content constantly attracts these young people's attention, tempting them to pick up the mobile devices to check what they have missed in the past few hours or even minutes. From an instant messaging service to a mobile-based social networking application which comprises a variety of functional features, WeChat is, from top to bottom, affectively designed to tempt users' senses. By the end of 2015, WeChat has accumulated almost 700 million users, which increased 70 times since early 2012 (Statista, 2016e). The increase in users exemplifies how the affective design of WeChat amplifies the application's affective capacity, making it an extremely popular mobile-based social networking application among Chinese users. This is the foundation that effectively enables the technology to play a significant role in users' everyday lives and thereby to mediate digital social norms.

[20] For details please see Chapter 2 – Digital Social Norms and Everyday Practices.

### 4.4 Affective Networks and Circulation of Affects

Despite mediating young people's digital social norms, mobile-based social networking applications, however, do not directly generate affects that force them to engage in certain practices. While these young people's autonomy is certainly important in their everyday practices, the affective design of the applications provides them with a pseudo-empowerment by encouraging them to play a significant role. In other words, these young people are encouraged to generate and circulate affects to fuel the mediation of digital social norms themselves. This pseudo-empowerment is built upon mobile-based social networking applications' Web 2.0 characteristics. Web 2.0 describes any form of internet technology featuring user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, pp. 60–61). As distinct from mass media, the ability to create and circulate the content that young people access every day on Web 2.0 technologies is not centralised in the institutions, but rather is shared among ordinary users through their participatory and collaborative contributions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Using Web 2.0 technologies, young people are invited to generate original content and share with others (boyd, 2014, p. 6; van Dijck, 2013, p. 45). This typically includes signing up for a unique account, creating a personal profile, adding a list of friends, and then sharing original content within the network of friends (boyd, 2011, p. 4; boyd & Ellison, 2007, pp. 213–14). This produces digital social norms in which young people seem to be in charge of when to share content and what content to share. Yet, the content flows are also sources of the attentive affects. Being affected by the content flows stimulates users' psychological satisfactions (Dean, 2010, p. 58). These forms of psychological satisfactions create Chinese young people's desire for more affective flows, transforming users into essential parts of the affective dynamics; they are not only being attracted by attentive affects but then also voluntarily generating and circulating attentive affects.

On WeChat, for example, this mobile-based social networking application allows Chinese young people to create personal networks via adding mobile contacts and sharing personal content within the networks defined by the contact lists (Kevin, 2012). The designer and the service provider – Tencent does not produce original content at all. All the original content is generated and circulated by Chinese young people when they make their personal profiles publically accessible to strangers

(stranger social plug-ins), share image archives of their personal life episodes as stream-based updates (Moments), and react to their WeChat contacts' stream-based updates (comments and like tags). While sharing these types of original content, these young people are simultaneously making an original contribution to the generation and circulation of attentive affects. In this way, WeChat forms affective networks – the networks in which attentive affects are generated and circulated (Dean, 2010, p. 95). The generation and transmission of affects through the networks of users emerge as 'a binding technique' that encourages users' continuous engagement (Dean, 2010, p. 95). By participating in affective networks in this way, Chinese young people are invited to not only consume affects but also manufacture them. They are constantly involved in the act of affect production but have little conscious awareness of being involved in these affective networks. This is true not only of mobile-based social networking applications like WeChat but also of a long list of Web 2.0 technologies, including blogs, traditional social networking applications (e.g. Facebook), and video-sharing websites (e.g. YouTube); all of these form affective networks. However, what makes mobile-based social networking applications so influential today is the installation of the applications on mobile devices. This resonates with Ash's (2015a, p. 88) emphasis on the associated environment, involving not only how the applications are affectively designed per se, but also how they work in relation to other technologies and objects.

Mobile devices are personal portable technologies, which users place in their pocket and bring along with them when they are travelling from one place to another (M. Ito & Okabe, 2005b, p. 257; Mizuko Ito, 2005, p. 131; Wallis, 2011, p. 61). Accessing mobile-based social networking applications via personal portable devices rather than a laptop or a desktop computer means that young people can easily be affected at anytime, anywhere – even when they are in motion (Cote, 2014, p. 130). The cooperation of mobile devices and mobile-based social networking applications constitutes an associated environment in which affects are transmitted among these users through the affective networks. This associated environment facilitates amplification of the affective capacity of mobile-based social networking applications because the amount of time that these young people spend on everyday travelling can then be exploited for producing and transmitting affects as well. For years, we have witnessed how everyday mobility becomes part of ordinary young people's life experiences in modern urban cities (Williams & Williams, 2003, p. 19). This rise of

mobile phone usage is a response to this shift (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 68; Farman, 2012, p. 17). The design of mobile-based social networking applications as mobile applications, following this shift, amplifies these technologies' affective capacity, increasing their influences on young people's everyday practices.

The associated mobile technological environment helps explain why Chinese young people's attention is particularly and constantly attracted by WeChat in their everyday lives. In the Chinese context, we find that mobile internet users account for over 80 per cent of the overall internet population (CNNIC, 2014b, p. 23). The design of WeChat is to be primarily used on a mobile device, running parallel with the trend of mobile internet usage in China. The accessibility to the application at any time anywhere significantly increases the amount of time that users might be affected. According to the report by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) (2013, p. 24), more than 50 per cent of Chinese internet users access WeChat when they are using public transport, on the way to school or workplace, or simply when waiting in a queue. In 2013, the statistics show that Chinese iPhone users spent only an average of 106 minutes per month on WeChat, whilst Android users spent 209 minutes per month on this application (Ng, 2013). Two years later, the amount of time that a Chinese user spends on browsing WeChat content has dramatically increased to 40 minutes every day (China Internet Watch, 2015; DMR, 2016). These remarkable figures provide a glimpse of the affective capacity of WeChat among Chinese young people.

Being endowed with affective capacity, WeChat addresses Chinese young people's need for communication, while also forming affective networks to encourage these young people's desire for attentive affects. The desire for attentive affects provoked by the affective networks explains why Chinese college students in the present netnographic enquiry constantly log in to their personal accounts to browse the new updates generated and circulated by others. Defining WeChat or similar mobile-based social networking applications as affective networks does not suggest that the use of mobile-based social networking applications is completely irrelevant to users' communication needs. A key motive that encourages Chinese young people to sign up for an account on WeChat is their need for communication. These young people may use WeChat – or similar mobile-based social networking applications – to remain in contact with friends, families, and colleagues and possibly subscribe to

news media and celebrity accounts. This technology-assisted connectivity shapes the world into interconnected networks where the social dynamics rely on the exchange of information (Castells, 2000, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2009). Therefore, the benefits that young people possibly reap from the use of these technologies – typically including remote management of friendships, development of social capital, and exchange of information – are never complete fabrications (Lambert, 2013, p. 8).

However, not all aspects of young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications aim at social networking or information exchanging. As the above figures from CNNIC (2013, p. 24) show, Chinese young people often use WeChat while doing other things. Accessing the technology while doing other things, these young people can neither concentrate on communicating with others nor focus on the activities that they are doing. However, withdrawing attention from the activities in their everyday lives is probably what these young people are attempting to do. While using WeChat, the user-generated content circulated through the application temporarily switches these young people's attention from the boring and routine daily tasks to the mobile gadgets in their hands. This helps them to cope with moments of vacancy in their sometimes mundane lives. In this process, these young people's response to the technologies also circulates whilst generating new attentive affects for others involved in the affective networks. A few more affects help the young people to achieve a little more satisfaction, which encourages them to seek for more attentive affects in the affective feedback loop (Dean, 2010, pp. 91–126). This is the dynamics of how the affective design of WeChat, or any other mobile-based social networking application, functions.

The affective design of mobile-based social networking applications encourages young people's desire for attentive affects, which amplifies the technologies' ability in mediating their everyday practices. This shapes the technologies into an important mediator of digital social norms. Chinese college students' use of WeChat, for example, provides a good illustration of how Chinese young people's digital social norms are shaped by the affective design of a mobile-based social networking application. Nevertheless, this by no means suggests that the phenomenon described above is peculiar solely to Chinese younger generations. To some extent, the desire for attentive affects has become a shared life experience in modern cities across the globe. Thus, digital social norms emerging with the use of mobile-based

social networking applications have to be contextualised within young people's everyday lives in urban cities. Living in urban cities, people are constantly affected by stimulators which constantly vie for their attention (Goldhaber, 1997). They are nearly always paying whilst seeking attention 'in ways and modes that are increasingly organised and tend to involve ever-larger and more dispersed audiences' (Goldhaber, 2006, p. n.p.). In particular, in cities which feature a high-density residential and fast-paced lifestyle, the affective design of mobile-based social networking applications is only one of the stimulators that contemporary urban citizens come across every day.

Mobile-based social networking applications attract the attentions of young people who live in urban cities but do not develop the capacity of their brains to cope with the multiple attentions. Young people do not have the attention span required to deal with the large amount of information that reaches them. Under these circumstances, their participations in the affective networks are exploiting the limited amount of attention that they have. Rushkoff (2013, pp. 3–4) argues that the use of mobile-based social networking applications requires human brains to conduct multitasks simultaneously. These multitasking brains are actually incapable of storage, which leads to a *temporal disorientation* (Stiegler, 2009, p. 40). In other words, the technologies create more tasks that attract young people's attention, helping them to cope with spare time, such as waiting in a queue or taking a bus alone. However, this also provokes multitasking, leading to the difficulty of concentrating on one specific activity. These young people access to these digital technologies in order to gain more pleasure, but, in fact, they usually hop from one option to another without gaining any pleasure at all (Rushkoff, 2013, p. 115). As a consequence, young people become incapable of imagining 'opportunities emerging and excitement arising from pursuing whatever we are currently doing' because they 'compulsively anticipate the next decision point' (Rushkoff, 2013, p. 115). Today's young people's desire for attentive affects and their limited capacity to cope with attention has created a more important set of tensional relations in their everyday urban lives.

Scrutinising mobile-based social networking applications through an affective lens, however, I do not argue that mobile-based social networking applications completely determine the shaping of digital social norms emerging with Chinese young people's everyday use. Young people, such as the Chinese college students in the present

netnographic enquiry, are constantly generating affects to be circulated in the affective networks of WeChat by sending short messages, and sharing personal profiles and Moments updates with other users. While original digital content is generated, these young people are encouraged to invest their time and efforts to recurrently check these updates and simultaneously produce new updates. The circulation of these affects, therefore, becomes an endless loop which constantly exploits their attentions. Failure to access these affects can lead to anxiety. This is an important aspect and describes the ways in which particular digital social norms, such as pulling out mobile phones to check personal accounts, are formed in Chinese young people's everyday use of WeChat and similar mobile-based social networking applications. However, Ash (2015a, p. 88) notes that the associated environment in which affects transmit also has a significant impact on how bodies are affected to generate a response. This associated environment not only relates to how human bodies are affected by a specific technology but also involves how the technology works in relation to other technologies and material objects. In particular, what makes mobile-based social networking applications different is this: these technologies are installed on mobile devices which can be used when travelling from one place to another. While the use of mobile-based social networking applications has become a shared experience in modern urban cities, the associated environment in which these technologies mediate digital social norms has to be contextualised in relation to urban spaces. In order to analyse how digital social norms are connected with Chinese young people's everyday lives in urban spaces, an interdisciplinary approach of new materialism and symbolic interactionism is developed in the following chapter.

### 4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have addressed the ways in which mobile-based social networking applications mediate digital social norms by influencing Chinese young people's everyday practices. By analysing urban Chinese youths' behaviours through an affective-account/everyday-practice-scope, we can say that mobile-based social networking applications are designed to form affective networks in which affects can be circulated (Dean, 2010, pp. 91–126). As the empirical evidence shows, the affective design of WeChat encourages Chinese young people to generate original content and circulate it within the networks by their fingers' every single touch on the digital devices in their hands. The original content that these young people generate

becomes the source of attentive affects circulated among each individual through his or her connections on the mobile-based social networking application. The production and circulation of these attentive affects through the affective networks attracts each individual's attention, encouraging him or her to pursue more attentive affects. The desire for attentive affects requires these young people to constantly pay attention to affective networks even when they do not really need to, and even when they are simultaneously committed to other activities. In particular, in my empirical study, the desire for attentive affects leads to Chinese college students' ubiquitous usage of WeChat in different places under different circumstances. This becomes the foundation supporting the technology to mediate the digital social norms that Chinese young people adhere to in their everyday lives.

However, we have to also be aware that Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications is not entirely determined by the way internet giants design the technologies. While the affective design defines the material thresholds of the technologies, the ways in which the technologies are used in these young people's everyday lives is also related to a level of autonomy subject to how they use the technologies as active users (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 2). The patterns and consequences of their use of the technologies are influenced – yet not completely determined – by the designers' will as well. In particular, the use of WeChat has become a part of Chinese young people's everyday life experiences. This parallels the rise of late-modern urban lifestyles in China and is influenced by how they move and behave in urban spaces. As I have illustrated, the existing scholarship, such as the literature by boyd (2007, 2011), Wood and Smith (2004), usually reproduces a vague dualism of physical/virtual space to separate people's non-mediated and mediated everyday practices. Thus, in the following chapter, I argue for a synthesis of symbolic interactionism and new materialism to address the theoretical gap. This approach helps to articulate how digital social norms are mediated in Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications with a particular emphasis on their everyday lives in urban spaces.

# Chapter 5. Self-Presentation and Personalisation of Space:

## How Do Urban Chinese Young People Present Their Identity on WeChat

### 5.1 Introduction

When interacting with other members of the society, we are always presenting images of ourselves (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). This practice is our self-motivated articulation of identity: a way to provide 'others with cues and symbols that help them place us in some context' and thereby facilitates further social interactions (R. Ling, 2004, p. 105). While mobile-based social networking applications are designed to facilitate social interactions, self-presentation explains a notable aspect of the digital social norms to which urban Chinese youths adhere.

In this chapter, a synthesis of symbolic interactionism and new materialism is used to analyse aspects of digital social norms which relate to urban Chinese youths' everyday use of WeChat. Following Mead (1934) and Goffman's (1959, 1963, 1967) symbolic interactionism, self-presentation can be understood as a form of dramatic performance in which we present ourselves through mobilising symbols (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 19; Chambers, 2013, p. 62). Audiences and symbols are equally important for understanding the context. The metaphor of everyday life as a play connotes that our self-presentation always considers audiences (Woodward, 2004, p. 14). We always have to consider strategically who is out there around us and what role we wish to play in front of them (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 165). To present ourselves in front of the audiences, we have to also consider what symbols are available for us to encode our self-images (R. Ling, 2004, p. 105). As Goffman (1959) notes, the symbols that people usually use include (1) deliberate verbal signs or gestures, as well as (2) unconscious non-verbal signs. For example, we can present ourselves by either explicitly describing ourselves or implicitly via dressing in a particular style. In this sense, audiences and available symbols simultaneously define the context for self-presentation practices.

New materialism is used to contextualise the discussion of urban Chinese youths' symbolic self-presentation within their urban life experiences with an emphasis on their everyday experiences of urban spaces. The new materialism criticises the dualistic philosophy which is structured by 'a negative relation between terms'

(Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2011, p. 383). It is similar to affect theory, emphasising how social dynamics emerge with the relational and complex encounters between human bodies, technologies, and material objects. The new materialist approach to space defines the construction of a space as an entwinement of the physical with the socio-culture, related to the negotiation of people's bodily encounters with their surroundings (Brewer & Dourish, 2008; Dourish, 2006; Moores, 2012). While location represents a significant physical dimension of a space, a person is able to engage with the physicality to experience the space (Moores, 2012, pp. 27–28).

The connection between users' self-presentation and their movements in spaces always exists because the practices have to take place in a space in which the users' bodies are situated (Moores, 2012, p. 23). This connection, in particular, becomes apparent in young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications. Mobile-based social networking applications are a particular type of social networking applications mainly used on smart mobile devices. While the devices incorporate Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers that identify users' current locations, mobile-based social networking applications encourage young people to make use of the information by recording and displaying it as location check-ins. For example, in Western countries, young people who use Facebook's mobile application may generate check-ins via Facebook 'Places' to announce their location when updating a status (Lambert, 2013, p. 79). The integration of location-based services enables young people to navigate locative information when they interact with each other on mobile-based social networking applications (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2010, 2012; Humphreys, 2007). This design magnifies the affectivity of locative information, making this an emerging form of symbols that can be used for self-presentation purposes as well (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012). In a pioneering study, Humphreys (2007) has already unveiled how Western young people present themselves through checking in locations, such as fancy restaurants, exclusive clubs, or tourist attractions, on Dodgeball[21].

By synthesising symbolic interactionism and new materialism, I argue that urban Chinese youths' self-presentation on WeChat emphasises their spatial experiences

[21] Dodgeball was an early mobile-based social networking application with location-based services (Humphreys, 2007, p. 343). It was invented by New York University students but was terminated in early 2009 (Goel, 2009).

through a combined display of their mundane everyday life episodes and location check-ins in Moments updates[22]. While a location check-in presents the physicality of a space, the mundane everyday life episodes describe how a user experiences and engages with space. Space, therefore, is personalised to facilitate the user's self-presentation. This approach helps uncover the digital social norms emerging with urban Chinese youths' self-presentation on WeChat, with a particular focus on their everyday engagement with and experiences of the late-modern urban spaces in post-reform China. Chinese college students are representative of Chinese young people living in urban cities. Building on my netnographic enquiry of Chinese college students' everyday use of WeChat, this chapter articulates how the presentation of location becomes personalisation of space, enabling these students to present themselves on mobile-based social networking applications. The salient points that I address in this chapter include:

(1) How Chinese young people manage their self-impression by conveying their personal tastes and lifestyle, reflecting the rise of individualism among the post-90s Chinese younger generation and their everyday lives in the late modern urban cities in China.

(2) How WeChat facilitates urban Chinese young people to practise self-presentation, through presenting their locations.

(3) How the presentation of location, alongside a display of mundane everyday life episodes, facilitates these young people to personalise the spaces they inhabit, engage with and experience. How this personalisation of space, in turn, enhances their self-presentation practices on mobile-based social networking applications.

### 5.2 Self-Presentation and the Weaknesses of Virtual/Physical Dualism

An account of Chinese young people's self-presentation cannot overlook the rapid cultural shift taking place in the post-reform China: Scholars, such as Bond (1996), Kleinman and Kleinman (1999), Kolstad and Gjesvik (2014), Ong and du Cros (2012), and Scheid (2002), argue that Chinese society is undergoing a dramatic

[22] Moments updates are stream-based content that WeChat users share on WeChat (similar to Facebook News Feed).

transition from being a collectivist culture to being an individualistic culture. In general, collectivist culture sees each individual as a part of a highly coherent society (Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014, p. 266). By contrast, individualism defines the self as autonomous and is the opposite of collectivism (Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014, p. 266). Before the 1970s, collectivism was a key feature of Chinese socialist ideology in which people should promote 'the good of collective over the individual' (Steele & Lynch, 2013, p. 442). Since the reform, however, the Western middle-class lifestyle has been introduced to China through media products, mass consumption, and global cultural flows (Liu, 2008a, p. 206, 2008b, p. 415). This has encouraged the acceptance of individualist ideology in which 'individual effort is rewarded and benefits the individual' (Steele & Lynch, 2013, p. 442). As mentioned in Chapter 2, individualism is a late-modern urban phenomenon, which reflects the development of urban dwellers' 'reflexive' capacity, owing to urbanisation, economic prosperity, cultural commoditisation, and technological innovation in cities (Giddens, 1991, p. 75). Life experiences in late-modern urban cities advocate individualism, encouraging personal choice, individual agency, and self-reflexivity (Giddens, 1991, p. 75). The advocacy of individualism in late-modern cities encourages urban young people to express their self-identities, so as to distinguish themselves from other social members (Giddens, 1991, p. 3).

Reaping the benefits from the remarkable economic explosion and only-child policy in cities, contemporary urban Chinese young people are able to purchase Western mass consumer and cultural products (Liu, 2011, p. 58). These young people worship Western individualism and view the Western late-modern middle-class lifestyle as the epitome of good living. Like their Western peers, they are willing to express their self-identity, so as to distinguish themselves from the older generation (Liu, 2011, p. 58). In particular, studentship in higher education guarantees one's urban living status in China (Meng et al., 2013, p. 2). Chinese college students are characteristic of urban young people as a whole, in China. Moore's (2005) empirical research with 51 Chinese college students has already found that having a 'cool' lifestyle (including the presentation of a pleasing appearance, stylish clothing, and independence) was an important part of the students' everyday self-expression of their identity as sophisticated, independent, and individualised intellectuals. Moore (2005) found that this identity defines the aspects of self that Chinese college students enjoy presenting to other members of society in their everyday lives.

Knowing the kind of self-image that urban Chinese young people would like to present, the question that remains to be asked is ‘how do these young people actually present themselves on mobile-based social networking applications?’ To answer this question, an understanding of space is required. While the logic of dramatic performances explained by symbolic interactionism is generally applicable, young people’s self-presentation is also unique to youth, and subject to the different spaces in which their practices take place (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, Handel, & Brubaker, 2014, p. 11; de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 164). A space is constructed through people’s bodily encounters with their surroundings, which consists of the other social members, artificial technologies, and natural material objects which either present or fail to present in the continuous area (Brewer & Dourish, 2008; de Certeau, 1984; Dourish, 2006; Rodgers, 2013, 2014). The construction of space, thus, is an entwinement of physical and socio-culture, highlighting both the social and material relations between us, our communication parties and surroundings (Brewer & Dourish, 2008). Being in a space is experienced through our interactions with the outside world, including the architectures, the geographic arrangements, the objects, and the human beings who are present (de Certeau, 1984; Dourish, 2006). For example, Rodgers (2013, p. 11) notes that editorial meetings taking place in the newsroom are:

> Intrinsically constituted by the arrangement of bodies, offices, and conference rooms, in which such practices became enclosed in time-space, enabling and responding to aspects of the world beyond that setting.
>
> (Rodgers, 2013, p. 11)

People’s engagement with space helps them to recognise the context in which their self-presentation takes place because it defines the audiences and the available symbols for their practices. A person may choose to present himself as a father when educating his children in the home. In the meantime, the same person may also present himself as a patient when seeing a doctor or a nurse at a hospital. The person’s bodily encounters with surroundings help him to position himself in a space which defines a specific context. This facilitates him to choose a role that he is willing to play in the context.

The term, ‘virtual space’, has been frequently used in media and cultural studies to describe the space in which digital communication technology users’ self-presentation practices take place. The ‘virtual space’ approach draws attention to our use of digital communication technologies as virtual space making practices (de Souza e Silva & Sutko, 2011, p. 25; Farman, 2012, p. 37). In other words, while using digital communication technologies, our presence is constructed through binary codes that are only readable to the computing technologies (boyd, 2008). The circulation of digital binary codes creates a homologised virtual space, which is detached from the physical spaces with which we engage every day (Iwata, 1990). In the virtual space, our self-presentation is practised through a digital avatar following the rules determined by the circulation of digital binary codes (boyd, 2008). The virtual space approach is undoubtedly appealing. It appears to explain why early internet users often invented pseudo identities to communicate on anonymous internet platforms, such as online bulletin boards, online chatting rooms, or online forums (Mehdizadeh, 2010). Even until fairly recently, scholars, such as Buffardi and Campbell (2008), Gentile et al. (2012), and Mehdizadeh (2010), have been using ‘virtual space’ to address the context for social networking applications users’ self-presentation practices. This approach argues that young people’s personal profiles are examples of digital ‘avatars’, which appear to be a proxy form of their presence in virtual space (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009, p. 510). On social networking applications, young people’s self-presentation, thus, is the presentation of their digital avatars rather than the young people per se.

However, the virtual space/digital avatar interpretation of digital communication technology users’ self-presentation is a problematic virtual/physical dualism. The most notable weakness is that it hides the inherent and intertwined relations between ‘being online’ and ‘being offline’. Through my netnographic enquiry, I discovered a normalised pattern of practice to which Chinese college students usually adhere when they use WeChat. This practice is: constantly sharing their personal life episodes in Moments updates. For example, Ning is a male college student participant who has been using WeChat for over two years. In the interview with him, Ning clearly stated that he always posts new Moments updates when he ‘came up with interesting ideas or experienced interesting things’ and ‘would like to share with friends’. Likewise, Zhang, a female participant, uses the verb ‘report’ to describe her

motives to generate Moments updates, saying that she considers Moments updates as a channel to 'report' the interesting parts of personal life episode to friends. This understanding of Moments updates was generally endorsed by the rest of the participants. This empirical evidence reveals a strong linkage between Chinese college students' WeChat Moments updates and their everyday lives, demonstrating that it is impossible to separate their self-presentation via WeChat from their everyday practices.

The inherent and intertwined connections between so-called 'online' settings and 'offline' settings are not only found in my enquiry of Chinese college students' use of WeChat but shared amongst Western young people using other social networking applications. Despite the vague term 'virtual space' being used, the studies by boyd and Ellison (2007), Buffardi and Campbell (2008), and Gentile et al. (2012) confirmed that Western young people often present a self-image on social networking applications that reflect who they are known to be in their everyday lives in general. For instance, by providing a series of authentic personal details, including the 'name, age, relationship status, favourite quotes, pictures, and a network of friends' on personal profile pages, the majority of Facebook users describe who they are and what they are like in their everyday lives (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 166). Likewise, Lambert (2013), and Sas et al. (2009) also noticed that Western young people often upload photographs to their Facebook Timeline (formerly known as the Wall) to share personal life episodes with friends. Their findings of Western young people's practices on Facebook resonate with outcomes of my exploration of Chinese college students' use of WeChat, showing that the virtual/physical space dualism does not lead to a comprehensive understanding of how self-presentation is practised by young people on mobile-based social networking applications.

### 5.3 Synthesis of New Materialism and Symbolic Interactionism

To move beyond the virtual/physical space dualism, new materialism and symbolic interactionism is synthesised to articulate the spatiality of Chinese young people's self-presentation practices on mobile-based social networking applications. From the mid-1990s onwards, Braidotti (2000, 2006, 2013) and De Landa (2005, 2006) started using the term new materialism or neo-materialism to address their philosophical approach to the studies of people's everyday practices (van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2010, p. 153). The new materialist approach adopts a materialist standpoint, viewing

the material world as a state independent from people's mind (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 38). However, new materialism does not deny the social construction of meanings and knowledge (Scott, Martin, & Schouten, 2014, p. 284). Rather, this approach involves a Deleuzian perspective (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988), according to 'agency to objects in constantly emerging and shifting assemblages of people, places, objects, and discourses' (Scott et al., 2014, p. 285).

The new materialist approach advocates 'thing-power' as the key to understanding the affirmative relation among different forms of social shaping (Bennett, 2009, p. 2). 'Thing-power', resonating with the concept of affect, helps to rethink the operationality of technologies and material objects (Parikka, 2012, p. 98). It highlights how these technologies and objects create a difference in our everyday practices and, thereby, become 'the device force catalysing an event' (Bennett, 2009, p. 9). The logic of how thing-power works is – while people are developing new technologies, the development of those technologies is always dependent upon the available natural resources and the existing technologies (Latour, 1990, p. 103; Scott et al., 2014, p. 284). It is undeniable that society organises and it influences the organisation on technologies. Nevertheless, these technologies, as well as material objects, also enhance, reshape, and limit people's everyday practices at the same time (Scott et al., 2014, p. 284). The emphasis of thing-power is an acknowledgment of the social and material entwinement of technologies.

What makes the new materialism particularly valuable to the critique of virtual space is that it transcends dualism. The new materialism is a critique of the dualistic philosophy which is structured by 'a negative relation between terms' and takes for granted the differences between the social and the material (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2011, p. 383). New materialism emphasises that the modernist (or postmodernist) dualisms usually prioritise 'mind' over 'matter', 'soul' over 'body', and 'culture' over 'nature' (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2011, p. 386). As Appadurai (1986) notes, we create objects, texts, and infrastructures that constitute the world around us and these, in turn, shape and reshape our experiences of being in the world. It becomes apparent that the dualisms do not facilitate a comprehensive understanding of how our everyday practices are operated (Parikka, 2012).

Following new materialism, we are able to think beyond a virtual/physical or online/offline dualism to understand space. As Rodgers, Barnett, and Cochrane (2009, p. 250, 2014, p. 1,065) note, the debates in human geography indicate that the construction of space actually refers to a complex intertwining of socio-cultures and materiality. Tuan (1977, p. 73) defines the concept of space by referring to place and location, suggesting that 'when space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place'. For Tuan (1977), spaces are built upon locations, emerging as the materiality of spatial presence. Our sense of place is constructed via our engagement with space through visualising and familiarising the physical location. On the other hand, de Certeau (1984, p. 117) views place as the pre-existing architectures and signs that people see when passing through a location. Space is 'practised place' (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117). The construction of space comprises 'interactions of mobile elements', referring to how human bodies interact with the place – the material dimension of the space (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117). He further explains that space can be seen as a continuous area that people walk through and is characterised by the routes that people choose when walking from one place to another. For instance, a street as a place is physically defined by the urban planners, yet it transforms into an urban space when pedestrians pass through (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117).

Building upon de Certeau's (1984) contribution, a new materialist approach to space further clarifies that, while place refers to 'the ways in which settings acquire persistence and recognisable social meaning in the course of interaction', space defines the 'geometrical arrangements that might structure, constrain, and enable certain forms of movement and interaction' (Dourish, 2006, p. 299). This new materialist approach suggests that neither place nor space can be seen as a natural fact. Rather, both concepts are understood as the products of different types of practices, including practices of 'land management', 'commercial exchange', 'cartography and navigation', 'geometric proof', and of course our everyday experience within the space (Dourish, 2006, p. 301). Thus, the construction of a space involves physicality: the location which defines the position of a place on the surface of the earth (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). While a place is constructed upon the location through historical arrangements of objects, space emerges as a temporary and ephemeral experience when we interact with the spaces and the objects situated in those spaces (Dourish, 2006, p. 299; Moores, 2012, p. 28).

The new materialist approach to space abolishes any vague and unhelpful dichotomy of space (Dourish, 2006, pp. 299–308). A mobile-based social networking application, or any digital communication technology, does not create a homogenised virtual space detached from users' physical surroundings. For example, the space on public transport is defined by passengers' bodily encounters with the vehicles, as well as with other passengers who are using the same public transport (Brewer & Dourish, 2008, pp. 973–974). A passenger is not invisible to other passengers when he or she is using a mobile phone, despite the fact that the passenger's attention to the surroundings might be detracted to a certain extent (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 45–46). As Ito and Okabe (2005a, pp. 127–145) discovered, mobile phones are often used by urban Japanese young people to negotiate their absence from an agreed meeting site with friends (via making a phone call or sending a text message to explain why he or she is late). Mobile-based social networking applications, therefore, can be understood as facilitators that enable users to engage with and negotiate their surroundings (Brewer & Dourish, 2008; Evans, 2015). These technologies are interfaces 'opening new forms of practice within the everyday world' (Dourish, 2006, p. 304).

Generally, an interface refers an object or a collection of objects, which has particular capacity and functionality to connect the different parts of a complete system (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 1–2). The interface per se is an essential component of the complete system, but it plays a particular role in shaping and reshaping the ways in which those different parts of the system interact (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012). The term – interface – firstly became popular in the electronic information technology industry. It was used by engineers to describe how human bodies interact with computer technologies. In the early days, only computing professionals understood how to use intermediate languages, such as assembly languages, to translate their actions into basic binary code so as to operate computing machines (Mazidi & Mazidi, 2000). Since the 1980s, electronic information engineers invented Graphical User Interface technology (i.e. GUI) (Gouy, Guindon, & Gascuel, 2010). The Graphical User Interface is a type of interface that allows ordinary users to interact with a personal computer by simply using a mouse to click icons and images shown on the computer screen (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012). The example of Graphical User Interface in the electronic information industry

describes how interfaces facilitate the interactions between different parts of a complete system (a human-computer system).

By borrowing the term from the electronic information technology industry, media and cultural theorists, such as de Souza e Silva and Firth (2012), start using interface to address what and how mobile-based social networking applications facilitate new forms of engagement with spaces in people's everyday practices. Their scholarship understands mobile technologies as interactional interfaces with public spaces; this approach is well-attuned to cultural specificites of technological use. However, the original term interface in the information technology industray may lead incorrectly to a problematic perspective, which misinterpretes the technological interface as simple as a linkage between the analogue and the digital (Ash, 2015b, p. 21). By definition, digital refers to the binary system of electronic information which is only readable to computer machines, while analogue is the visual, auditory, or tactile signal that is understandable to human beings as well (Ernst, 2013; Lunenfeld, 2000). Following this dichotomy, Interfaces therefore are misinterpreted as the simple connecting nodes between the analogue and the digital realms. When readable texts or images, are produced by an interface, the reading of such analogues by human bodies continues the analogue process (Amoore, 2011; Massumi, 2002). In other words, the analogues are ways to experience the digital, while the interfaces define the ways (Wark, 2009, p. 81). Viewing interface as a linkage between analogue and digital realms sounds seductive. However, this perspective is problematic, because, as Ash (2015b, p. 22) argues, it portrays a paradoxical scenario that the digital is either authorised productive power or reduced to 'a set of possible mathematical states'. This perspective can lead to an erroneous technological determinist assumption that human beings can only read the data which are supplied and determined by the interface (Ash, 2015b, p. 22)

Thus, by bearing in mind de Souza e Silva and Firth's (2012) cultural specificities of interface, I follow Ash's (2015b, p. 31) new materialist approach to space, arguing that an interface constitutes an interface environment in which an assemblage of bodies and objects are continually encountering one another. Through an interface, the bodies and objects are assembled to be 'positioned and spaced in relation to one another in order to transducer qualities for both other objects in the interface and the user engaging with that interface' (Ash, 2015b, p. 31). When using mobile-based

social networking applications or any other types of digital communication technologies, we are, therefore, traversing from the spaces in which we are situated to form interaction with the spaces in which our communication parties are situated. Still referring to Ito and Okabe's (2005a, pp. 127–145) example, the interaction between Japanese young people is formed via mobile phone-assisted transmission of voice/text messages. It renders the young people's movements towards the meeting site meaningful to friends, thereby making them tolerate his or her lateness. As a result of this ability to shape interactions via interfaces, the meaning of our experience of and engagement with the spaces in which our bodies are situated changes as well.

A synthesis of symbolic interactionism and new materialism provides a new angle from which to scrutinise Chinese college students' self-presentation practices on WeChat by acknowledging their engagement with the spaces in which their bodies are situated. Traversing from one space to interact with others, the characteristics of the space in which a person's body is situated become an extension of his or her personal characteristics. Users of mobile-based social networking applications may redefine the characteristics of the space (i.e. personalisation of the space) so as to manage the self-image being presented. As de Certeau (1984, p. 117) puts it, 'space is a practised place'. A place consists of an articulation of the complex mixture of the people, memories, and material objects in a particular location (Massey & Jess, 1995, p. 42; Moores, 2012, pp. 28–29). The location of the place represents the physicality of the place, as well as the space constructed when people experience the place. Thus, presentation of location is a starting point for the personalisation of space, which facilitates mobile-based social networking application users' self-presentation. Virtual/physical space dualism overlooks the connection between location and young people's self-presentation practices on (mobile-based) social networking applications. This weakness was not apparent in the past because the social networking applications in the pre-mobile era were mainly used on relatively fixed desktop or laptop devices (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 118). Being fixed in a specific location, the user's engagement with space, therefore, did not have a significant impact on the data that social networking application users generate or access (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 118).

Using mobile-based social networking applications, young people's experiences of the urban spaces in which their bodies are situated become important because the applications are often used while users are moving from one location to another. Young people's location, which reflects their actual engagement with spaces, influences how these technologies are used. The release of iPhone 3G and Android Phones in 2008 has led to a mobile-based social networking era (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011, p. 41). Long lists of mobile-based social networking applications, including WeChat, are designed to be used on these smart mobile devices. As the statistics from the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) (2014a) show, more than 50 per cent of Chinese users access WeChat when they are using public transport, on the way to school or workplace, or while waiting in a queue. The possibility of using this application in motion requires a user to constantly negotiate his or her presence in different spaces while interacting with other users. Amid these negotiations, the user's self-presentation practices cannot be understood without unpacking the relations between the user and his or her surroundings. These negotiations describe an innovative aspect of self-presentation practices that defines the digital social norms emerging with Chinese college students' use of WeChat.

### 5.4 Presentation of Location in Urban Spaces

Presentation of location provides a new lens through which to scrutinise how Chinese college students use WeChat to practise self-presentation with a particular focus on how they negotiate their bodily encounters with surroundings in urban spaces. Through my netnographic enquiry, I found that, among my Chinese college student participants, the most notable pattern of locative presentation is producing location check-ins in WeChat Moments. A location check-in specifies a user's location via Global Positioning System (GPS). Today, a GPS receiver and associated location-based services that pinpoint the location of the user in a real-time updating electronic map have become standardised equipment of the smart mobile phones that we use every day (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011, p. 41). Location-aware Mobile-based social networking applications, such as Brightkite, Dodgeball, Facebook Place, Foursquare, Instagram, Loopt, and LooptMix, were designed, enabling users to socialise by navigating personal locative information (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015; Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011; Humphreys, 2007; Lambert, 2013; Lindqvist et al., 2011; T. Morgan, 2009;

Silva, Vaz de Melo, Almeida, Salles, & Loureiro, 2013). By using Facebook Place, for instance, young people may ‘check in’ at their current location to announce their whereabouts to friends (Lambert, 2013, p. 79).

### 5.4.1 *Location Check-Ins and Presentation of Location*

A location check-in archives users’ real-time location, reflecting their mobility in the urban cities when they generate content on mobile-based social networking applications. As with those location-based social networking applications, WeChat also provides location-based services, enabling Chinese young people to specify the location where they upload a Moments update. Through the present netnographic enquiry, I found that many of my netnographic participants use check-ins to record their current locations when uploading Moments updates. For instance, Tao is a Fourth Year male student. The 22-year-old almost always generates new Moments updates alongside location check-ins (see Figure 6). The locations are usually very specific (e.g. a street, a park, a coffee shop, or a cinema etc.). Every location check-in is an archive that records his footprints in the urban space, illustrating where he visits every day. As he noted,

> I saved the moments that I think are worth saving in WeChat Moments… These include things I have come across… and of course what places I have visited as well… (The location check-ins) record my footprints, showing my friends where I have been…
>
> Tao

Figure 6. Tao's Moments Updates with Location Check-Ins

N.B. the Location Check-Ins are Underlined

In my netnographic enquiry, Tao's practice is typical amongst his peers. A location check-in displays users' presence in a specific location that they move through or pass by. The locative archive allies the students' bodily engagement and their immediate surroundings when a Moments update is shared with WeChat contacts. However, we should not assume that one's presence in a specific location cannot be recorded without location-based services. This can be also archived in visual images that these young people upload on mobile-based social networking applications to describe their mundane everyday life episodes (Silva et al., 2013, pp. 7–8). Taking participant Xiaoning as an example, it emerged that the 21-year-old female student often uploads photographs of food in her WeChat Moments. Xiaoning noted that these photographs were mainly taken with her mobile phone. Close-up shots were most often used to capture the fine detail of the dishes being served. The vivid colour and attractive appearance of the dishes in these photographs implies how delicious the food was. Yet, the meaning of uploading these snapshots of food goes far beyond the display of the food served. Photographs do not simply display items (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 709). They are 'created through movement' and therefore are 'part of a world that is always in forward motion' (Pink, 2011, p. 9). The photographs seem to be still, but represent the dynamic moments when people were taking them

(Walker & Moulton, 1989; Wilson, 1992). The dynamics of the moments when the photographs were taken, including the photographers' location and mobility, are visually recorded in the photographs (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 709).

Revisiting participant Xiaoning's Moment, I found that the presentation of location is embedded in her Moments updates of food snapshots. Although Xiaoning did not always provide detailed locative information for all her Moments updates about food, it became apparent that she still left visual clues to denote 'where she was served with the dishes'. For example, one of her updates includes snapshots of two beautiful cupcakes, alongside a unique food menu (see Figure 7). The restaurant's logo was clearly shown on both of the cupcakes and the menu, revealing where she was served with the food. In this update, not only 'what food was served' but also 'where the food was served' were intentionally highlighted. Xiaoning's location was, therefore, presented in the visual record of her personal life episodes even without location check-ins.

Figure 7. Xiaoning's Moments Update of Food

The presentation of location on mobile-based social networking applications becomes apparent after the emergence of location-based services. Yet, this also

parallels the rise of visual records of people's everyday lives since the integration of cameras on our mobile phones. In the past, personal photographs were mainly used to record and celebrate memorable moments in family lives, such as weddings or wedding anniversaries. This is because the size of the cameras of that time rendered them unsuitable for everyday use (Riviere, 2005, p. 168). However, because of the wide proliferation of today's camera mobile phones, cameras have become an essential and integrated part of the everyday communication devices that people always carry in their pocket (Riviere, 2005, p. 168). Consequentially, people can take photographs whenever and wherever they wish to. Mundane life experiences, alongside the locations for these experiences, are archived as photographs as soon as they are captured by the camera lens of a mobile phone (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 699; M. Ito & Okabe, 2005b; Koskinen, 2007). The rise of visual storage of mundane life episodes, alongside location-based services, facilitates users to record and thereby present their locations.

The rise of locative presentation confirms that mobile-based social networking applications never create a virtual space detached from physical spaces; rather, they function as interfaces to experience spaces. Spaces are 'practised places' constructed upon specific locations (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117). When a location is displayed on mobile-based social networking applications as a location check-in, the users' presence in the location is verified. The presentation of location endorses these users' bodily encounters with their immediate surroundings, which constitutes an important dimension of their experiences of the urban spaces in which their bodies are situated. These young people, therefore, are able to perform their engagement with the spaces in front of friends in distant locations.

### 5.5 Personalisation of Space in Urban Cities

With a particular focus on Chinese young people's self-presentation on WeChat, the presentation of location is a starting point for the personalisation of space. When a location is presented, Chinese young people can then use their particular engagement with the space to personalise the characteristics of the space. Following de Certeau (1984), Brewer and Dourish (2008), we should have no doubt that all spaces have a level of inter-subjectivity because the construction of a space always refers to human beings' practices and their bodily encounters with the material objects that present or fail to present within the spaces. However, I use the term

personalisation of space to capture mobile-based social networking application users' capacity to redefine the meaning of the spaces through their personalised engagement. The personalisation of a space is practised in relation to how space is contextually presented, subject to the visual/textual records of a user's mundane everyday life episodes when he or she engages with space.

Within the use of mobile-based social networking applications, the display of a location check-in appears to be neutral but the meaning of this space is subjective. It refers to 'an articulation of that specific mix in social space-time' (Massey & Jess, 1995, p. 22). In other words, the meaning of a space is constructed in relation to a tangled web of the past and present (Perkins & Thorns, 2012, p. 22). It links collective memories of what has happened in the past and an individual's experience of what is happening at present (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 110). A user's presentation of a location, therefore, is always subjective, referring to the meaning of the space to him or her. Participant Liang's Moments updates provide a good illustration of how spaces are personalised. Accessing the 22-year-old young man's WeChat Moments, I found that many of Liang's Moments updates include location check-ins. Yet, it also becomes apparent that he did not specify the location of every single update. For instance, during January and February 2015, he only provided location check-ins for four Moments updates; three out of the four are shown as the library of the university he attends. These check-ins accurately illustrate Liang's locations at the time when he was uploading the Moments updates. Nevertheless, rather than a random decision, his presentation of the locations was clearly selective, serving Liang's management of self-impression in WeChat Moments.

Self-presentation, nevertheless, cannot be solely achieved through the presentation of location. It also involves the strategic personalisation of space built upon the presentation of location as well. Space can be personalised by allying one's presence in a location with the characteristics of the space built upon the location. One may argue that a library symbolises a location for middle-class intellectuals because those universally acknowledged symbols of knowledge – textbooks, periodicals, papers, as well as all other types of study materials, are often stored in libraries. Visiting a library to read and to study therefore becomes a typical intellectuals' agenda. Nevertheless, the meaning of a visit to a library, which transforms the library into space, is also contextual; it is subject to how and why one

engages with space. For instance, one Chinese college student may go to a library to study, while another one may visit there for an arranged appointment with his or her close friends. Without clarifying the purposes of engaging with space, the meaning of the space is vague and unclear. Thus, in order to practise self-presentation on WeChat, Chinese young people have to personalise the space by performing and expressing their engagement with the library.

The present netnographic enquiry found that how Chinese college students use WeChat Moments to personalise spaces depends on the display of personal life episodes alongside location check-ins. Revisiting Liang's WeChat Moments, for instance, I also discovered that all three updates uploaded alongside 'library' location check-ins shared by Liang are snapshots of study materials collected on bookshelves (see Figure 8). Liang shares photographs of what reading materials are available in the library. This is because Liang is not only interested in 'reading' these materials, but also would like to 'show' others what he reads when he visits the library. Reading academic journals requires a certain level of intelligence and literacy, which is shared among the well-educated population. The display of his journal reading activities endorses the meaning of the library as an intellectual space when he bodily encounters the architecture. The meaning of the library space, thereby, becomes personalised through how he engages with that space and how he selectively displays his engagement.

Figure 8. Liang's Moments Updates with a Snapshot of the Bookshelves

The connection between the presentation of location and the personalisation of space is not only found in my Chinese college student participants' use of WeChat but shared among urban young people's use of many similar applications with location-based services across the globe. For example, Socialight allows Western young people to add blog posts to a location when they pass by in urban spaces (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 169). Similarly, the application 'Foursquare' and its Chinese imitation version called 'Jiepang' allow urban young people to describe their feelings about a location by rating and commenting on it (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 169; Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 699). The information attached to a location is generated by these young people, which redefines the meanings of the urban space built upon the location. Nevertheless, what makes Chinese college students' practices on WeChat unique is the emphasis on visual personal life episodes.

The above examples from my Chinese college student participants clearly show that personalisation of space on WeChat requires the visual records of their everyday life episodes to endorse the meanings that they intend to define the space. The camera integrated into a mobile phone generates archives of one's presence (Hjorth, 2006, pp. 23–42; Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 703). These visual archives of young people's life

episodes precisely capture their on-going practices when they are engaging with urban spaces. While the camera records the visual archives of Chinese college students' mundane everyday lives, WeChat Moments enable these students to share these visual archives. By sharing these image archives along with location check-ins, the students' particular engagement with and experience of urban spaces is articulated. This serves as a 'shop window', enabling others to access to the students' everyday practices as they engage with a particular urban space. While Chinese young people's everyday practices constantly redefine the meaning of the urban space in which their bodies are situated, space, as a consequence, becomes personalised.

### 5.6 Self-Presentation through Personalisation of Space

Chinese young people use WeChat to personalise the spaces with which they engage for their everyday practices. This mode of behaviour is not aimless but has particular self-presentation implications. In Liang's case, for example, the library was viewed by participant Liang as a space to put his intelligence, literacy, and academic competence into practice. Scrutinising Liang's WeChat Moments, we can see that the location check-ins and image archives of personal life episodes were used to articulate his intellectual engagement with the university library. The displays of his engagement with the library align him with the library space, becoming a way to present a particular aspect of his self-image that he wishes to present to his friends on WeChat. In particular, Liang was awarded the National Scholarships for Chinese College Students. Being awarded this scholarship shows Liang's high-level of academic competence in his department. Through the continuous interaction with him, I found that Liang identifies himself as a sophisticated post-90s generation intellectual and is proud of his academic achievements. Following Mead (1934) and Goffman's (1959, 1963, 1967) symbolic interactionism, Liang's display of particular location check-ins, therefore, can be seen as a symbolic performance of his appreciation of being a post-90s generation intellectual. Related to my above findings, through a year-long participant observation, user observations, and in-depth interviews, Humphreys (2007, p. 349) identified that Dodgeball users' location check-ins in 'an expensive club' or 'a fancy restaurant' usually reflect a desire to 'show-off'. By displaying the location check-ins, the users aligned their bodies with the particular locations, which are associated with wealthy and status in the contemporary consumerist society (Humphreys, 2007). In this way, the users were able to

appropriate the characteristics of the locations as an aspect of self that they intended to portray (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 167).

However, presentation of location alone cannot accomplish effective self-presentation practices without personalisation of space. As mentioned in the above sections, Chinese college students' presentation of location in WeChat Moments is also associated with visual and textual approaches to personalise the spaces built upon the locations. The Chinese college students practise personalisation of space through sharing the personal life episodes capturing their mundane everyday routines when engaging with the spaces. Still referring to Liang's practices for example, rather than presenting his presence in the library with a simple check-in, he also shares his study agenda alongside the pictures of the study materials collected in the library. These visual records personalise the space, which endorses the meanings of his engagement with space (to study) that Liang wants to construct. The personalisation of space aligns Liang's identity with the meanings of his engagement with space, which enhances his capacity to portray the aspects of self that he wishes to present to his WeChat friends.

Personalisation of space enhances self-presentation because one's engagement with particular spaces reveals one's cultural tastes. According to Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1990b) class-based account of taste in urban cities, people's tastes and identities are closely connected; this consequently informs how they behave, - and, especially how they consume – in their everyday lives. For instance, people's social class position is defined by the amount of capital, including economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital, that they hold (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1990b; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Collins, 1981). This coincides with people's patterns of everyday consumption, determining the consumer goods that they aspire to own (Holt, 1998, p. 4). Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1990b) approach provides a useful way to understand how taste and lifestyle become everyday practices that are inherently intertwined within people's identity recognition.

Chinese young people's self-presentation practised through personalisation of space can be understood by combining Mead (1934) and Goffman's (1959, 1963, 1967) symbolic interactionism and Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1990b) distinction of taste, with a particular emphasis on these young people's everyday engagement with and

experiences of urban spaces: Following Mead (1934) and Goffman's (1959, 1963, 1967) symbolic interactionist approach, one may argue that the display of what we consume is a mode of symbolic presentation that describes our distinctive taste, enhancing our self-presentation when encountering other social members. Performance of one's distinction of taste is not only about the display of particular items he or she consumes, but also the systematic presentation of how he or she practises the consumption. The particular spaces with which one engages for practising consumption are clues that reveal one's distinctive taste. Here I am not suggesting that the performance of consumption is the only way to present one's distinctive taste. However, while witnessing the rise of consumerism in the contemporary urban cities in China (Hjorth & Gu, 2012; Liu, 2011), my netnographic enquiry confirmed a strong linkage between consumption and self-presentation among the vast majority of my Chinese college student participants' practices of personalisation of space on WeChat.

The ways in which participant Qian practises self-presentation is also related to the emphasis of her distinctive taste via her personalisation of space. Her artistic consumer habits are revealed by her practices. Participant Qian is a Third Year female college student who was born in a typical urban middle-class family. Qian's parents are both professional skilled government employees who earn decent wages and are able to support her consumer habits. Meeting with Qian, I noticed that she had very artistic dress sense: on the day we met for the interview, she was wearing a dark grey jumper and a Bohemian cashmere scarf, alongside many tiny little bronze accessories on her arms and ears. She said that she learned this style of dress from the main character of an Italian movie that, for her, symbolised the sophisticated and intellectual Western lady. In Qian's everyday life, she follows the actress' style to harmonise her dressing style and her self-identity (as a Westernised, sophisticated lady). Unsurprisingly, through the observation of Qian's WeChat Moments, I found that her updates reveal her artistic everyday practices as well. Specifically, many of the Moments updates were generated to capture Qian's mundane everyday life episodes when she is engaging with particular spaces with an emphasis on her middle-class consumer habits.

In Qian's case, space is presented through a combination of location check-ins alongside visual records of her mundane life episodes. The meanings of the spaces

in which Qian's mundane everyday lives are practised are simultaneously personalised by highlighting her distinctive taste in reading matter, clothing, and associated daily consumption. For example, in an update that contains four photographs, Qian provided a caption, explaining that this was just 'A Normal Day in My Room, Nothing Special Happened' (see Figure 9). This caption clearly highlights her mundane everyday engagement with a particular space, which is her own room in the home. The first photograph in the update is a snapshot of textbooks and women's lifestyle magazines that spread out on the ground of her accommodation, whilst the second is a close-up shot of a cup of coffee being placed on a table, alongside the third and the fourth which are both pictures of the scenery outside the window of her accommodation. The photographs are either long shots (the snapshot of the room and the exterior views) or close-up shots (the shot of the coffee) which clearly involve technical manipulation to convey her good understanding of aesthetics. In particular, coffee consumption in China is usually associated with the emerging well-educated Westernised middle-class lifestyle (L. Zhou & Hui, 2003, p. 36). The illustration of Qian coffee drinking in the home in Figure 9 is also a notable symbolic performance, highlighting her consistent appreciation of the Westernised middle-class intellectual lifestyle throughout her day-to-day routines. The Moments update visually captures Qian's everyday consumption of coffee even when she is in her own room. This personalises the room as a space with which Qian engages for her artistic daily routines. The personalisation of the space helps Qian to manage a self-impression that she wishes to share with friends.

Figure 9. Qian's Moments Update of 'A Normal Day in Her Room'

Likewise, participant Tao's distinctive taste is also presented via his coffee consumption when he is engaging with particular spaces. Revisiting Tao's Moments updates, I found that he often uploads photographs that indicate his coffee consumption. It is worthwhile mentioning that, unlike Qian, the archives of Tao's coffee consumption often took place in Starbucks coffee shops. For example, Tao posted a Moments update on comprising a photograph of a coffee mug. The update was provided with a location check-in alongside a caption emphasising that he consumed the coffee in a Starbucks coffee shop (see Figure 10). Different from its brand image in the West, Starbucks in China is not only a chain-store coffee shop but also a symbolic space constructed for the emerging Chinese middle class to consume the imagined Western middle-class lifestyle – which is highly tempting to the Chinese younger generation (Henningsen, 2012; Maguire & Hu, 2013). Therefore, the location in which Tao consumed the mug of coffee is important. The visual archives of Tao's consumption, alongside the location check-ins, align his distinctive taste with the cultural meanings of Starbucks coffee shops as spaces for Westernised Chinese middle-class consumption, enabling Tao to present his appreciation of being a sophisticated and westernised post-90s generation youngster.


Figure 10. Tao's Moments Update of Starbucks Coffee Consumption

N.B. the Starbucks Location Check-In is Highlighted

Regarding distinctive taste for self-presentation, Chinese college students' practices reflect the rise of individualism in the modern urban cities of China. Drawing on Giddens' (1991, p. 75) conceptualisation of individualism addressed in Chapter 2, Chinese college students' motives of self-presentation can be explained by these young people's 'reflexive' capacity as developed in the late modern period. As the 'only-child' generation living in urban cities with material prosperity, the post-90s generation Chinese college students, similar to Western youth, are able to explore personal choice and develop personal interests, amid the rise of individualism and mass consumerism in the late modern China[23]. Following in the footsteps of their peers in the West, Chinese college students also value their distinctive taste in consumption and view these characteristics as an important aspect of their identity. They wish to present a self-image by demonstrating their independence, sophistication, and distinctive middle-class intellectual's taste in their everyday lives. While generating Moments updates, these students continuously manage this self-impression to subtly emphasise their personal characteristics in this respect. These Chinese college students' presentation of their distinctive tastes and particular

[23] For details please see Chapter 2 – Digital Social Norms and Everyday Practices for the section about the Chinese socio-cultural context.

lifestyle has increasingly become the way in which these young people are identified in contemporary Chinese society.

What makes Chinese college students' self-presentation practices on WeChat interesting is that they demonstrate the importance of spatial experience in their everyday use of the mobile-based social networking application. The spatiality of their WeChat can be explained thus: while a person is using the mobile-based social networking application, his or her physical presence in a space cannot be withdrawn by the use of the technology. The practices of self-presentation, therefore, are closely connected to the complex relations between the presenter and the space with which he or she engages for everyday practices. This spatial experience echoes my main argument that self-presentation on mobile-based social networking applications does not refer to a 'digital avatar' creation, but can be understood as a particular mode of self-impression management in everyday lives. Revisiting Goffman's (1959, 1963, 1967) scholarship, the term 'stage' can be seen as an alternative expression of space, defining the context in which one's self-presentation occurs. While human bodies are situated in a location, a complex set of relations between users' bodies and their surroundings emerges when they engage with space.

Although sharing a similar spatially-articulated experience of self-presentation in other contexts, Chinese college students' self-presentation on WeChat is distinctive. This refers to how the technology functions as an interface that provides these young people with supportive autonomy to personalise the space in which their bodies inhabit. Following Ash's (2015b) conceptualisation of the interface as the assemblage of objects, we may argue that the interfaces also allow users redefine the meaning of a space when encountering other users. The other users who a person encounters on a mobile-based social networking application seem to be physically absent from the space in which the person inhabits. Yet, they actually become a part of the person's surroundings, allowing the other users to be related to the space in which the person inhabits. In the meantime, the interface also provides the person with a level of autonomy to control how the other users are related to space. Taking WeChat for example, the display of visual records of mundane everyday lives, alongside location check-ins, enables a Chinese college student to define a space through his or her practices. The association of the student's

engagement with space is selective, subject to his or her own autonomy. This allows the student to personalise the meanings of the space and associates the personalised meanings with his or her identity and personal characteristics.

Personalisation of space ensures the efficiency of the symbolic interactions for Chinese young people's self-presentation practices. These young people use personalisation of space to endorse their self-image presented on mobile-based social networking applications, because of the decline of symbolic efficiency in the digital era. The decline of symbolic efficiency refers to the failure of delivering the intended meanings of a symbol (Dean, 2010). With the emergence of the internet, the efficiency of a symbolic item declines. For example, a person may want to show friends his or her recent visit to Paris by uploading a picture of Eiffel Tower, alongside a caption saying 'I just visited this place', on his or her personal Facebook Timeline. However, that person's friends on mobile-based social networking applications may not easily trust him or her unless a location check-in is provided since anyone can download a picture like that from the internet to 'fake up' the visit. Personalisation of space through a combination of location check-ins and visual records presents users' engagement with a particular space with concrete evidence. This ensures that the self-presentation is not only a simple display of symbolic items but also a dynamic performance of on-going everyday practices with designed meanings. The meanings of the practices ensure the efficiency of self-presentation on mobile-based social networking applications in an age in which symbolic efficiency has declined. This mode of self-presentation has become increasingly normalised among urban Chinese young people, forming an important dimension of the digital social norms emerging with their use of WeChat.

### 5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have addressed the digital social norms emerging with Chinese college students' use of WeChat with a particular focus on their self-presentation on the application. This provides an account of how new modes of self-presentation are formed in people's everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications and how these involve social norm implications. Self-presentation, following Mead (1934) and Goffman's (1959) symbolic interactionism, refers to the communication of culturally coded symbols in stage-like self-impression management. Through the present netnographic enquiry, it has become apparent that the self-impression that

Chinese college students aspire to present usually refers to that of a Westernised younger generation intellectual who enjoys distinctive taste and appreciates a middle-class lifestyle. These students' self-impression management is closely connected with their performance of how and where they consume every day, paralleling the rise of individualism and self-reflexivity among the Chinese younger generation living in the late-modern urban cities in China.

Regarding Chinese students' use of WeChat to perform consumption for self-presentation purposes, what makes the emerging digital social norms interesting is embedded in the spatiality of these students' everyday use of the mobile-based social networking application. In the past, media and cultural researchers, such as Buffardi and Campbell (2008), Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, and Campbell (2012), and Mehdizadeh (2010), used digital avatar creation to explain young people's self-presentation on social networking applications. The social networking applications were regarded as a virtual space maker that defines the virtual context for users' self-presentation practices. The virtual space method conceals the complex and intertwined nature of 'being online' and 'being offline'. However, social networking applications do not withdraw young people from the spaces in which their bodies are situated, but function as interfaces that redefine these young people's bodily encounters with their surroundings. The spatiality is particularly important to today's urban young people who use mobile-based social networking applications like WeChat because these applications are used on mobile devices. While moving from one location to another, the relations between these young people's bodies and surroundings are constantly changing. The location-based services integrated into mobile-based social networking applications, then, allow these young people to articulate these relations through location check-ins. The presentation of location, alongside real-time archives of personal life episodes, enables users to perform their engagement with spaces in order to personalise these spaces. The personalised meanings of engaging with the spaces become an extension of the users' personal identities, becoming an emerging way of self-presentation shared among Chinese college students' use of WeChat. This emerging practice departs from a simple display of symbolic items, making self-presentation more dynamic and sensitive to people's on-going movement in and engagement with spaces. It sheds new light on the studies of digital social norms and mobile-based social networking applications,

enabling us to consider people's self-presentation practices beyond a simple virtual/physical space dualism.

The digital social norms that Chinese college students adhere to in their use of WeChat relate to a series of complex issues. Self-presentation is one, but not the only important issue. A notable motive that encourages users to sign up for a personal account on mobile-based social networking applications relates to the opportunities to manage and develop social networks by using the technologies (Chambers, 2013; CNNIC, 2013, 2014b). In particular, I found that many Chinese college students are actively using WeChat to develop social networks on campus after they move far away from home to study at the university. In the following chapter, therefore, I discuss the digital social norms emerging with Chinese college students' use of WeChat in relation to their use of the mobile-based social networking applications for social network development in urban spaces.

# Chapter 6. Spatial Proximity and Encounters with Strangers:

## How Chinese Young People Use WeChat to Develop Friendship/Romance in Urban Spaces

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter determines how WeChat provides a unique opportunity that facilitates social interactions between strangers in urban areas. The use of mobile social media for interacting with strangers comprises another notable aspects of the digital social norms to which urban Chinese youths adhere in their everyday lives. The term 'stranger' often has a negative connotation, describing those who we do not know or recognise (D. Morgan, 2009, p. 3). In modern cities which are busy and crowded, Goffman (1963, pp. 132–133) notes a rise of *civil inattention* which defines how urban dwellers negotiate social encounters with strangers in urban spaces. As Morgan (2009, p. 3) explains, urban dwellers only recognise 'certain minimal obligations' when passing someone who was previously unknown to them in a street. These obligations, typically including 'not touching', 'eye contact', and 'avoidance', involve minimal acknowledgement of the strangers' close proximity (D. Morgan, 2009, p. 3). Civil inattention is not only discovered in the West but also found in East Asian countries, such as China (Zhu, Breitung, & Li, 2012, p. 2,439). It discourages social interactions between strangers who inhabit in urban cities. However, social interactions with strangers are not always undesirable (Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017, pp. 68–69). Haythornthwaite (2005, p. 137) uses 'latent ties' to explain the 'technically possible but not yet activated' connection between strangers, which can possibly be converted to weak or strong ties (bonding acquaintances or close friends respectively). This resonates with Morgan's (2009, p. 5) assertion that 'strangers can become acquaintances and acquaintances can become intimates', describing how social interactions with strangers may help people expand personal social networks in urban cities.

Urban young people may come across strangers on (mobile-based) social networking applications (Chambers, 2013, p. 92). For these young people, encounters with strangers are not always unwanted because of their potential for expanding personal social networks. Through a survey of 802 teenagers in the US, a study by the Pew Research Centre shows that many American young people do not

always consider contact from strangers as ‘unwanted’ in their everyday use of social networking applications (Mary Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi, Smith, & Beaton, 2013, p. 78). The acceptance of social interactions with strangers is not exclusive to young people living in the US. A series of studies have found how young people across the globe use emerging mobile-based social networking applications to interact with strangers for friendship, romance, or sexual encounters (Birnholtz et al., 2014, p. 3; Birnholtz, Shklovski, Handel, & Toch, 2015, p. 283; Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2016, p. 3; Fitzpatrick, Birnholtz, & Brubaker, 2015, p. 1,983; Licoppe & Inada, 2009, p. 106; Miller et al., 2016, p. 120; Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Walrave, Ponnet, & Peeters, 2016, p. 76).

In particular, on mobile-based social networking applications, social interactions between strangers are often negotiated by sharing spatial proximity (Birnholtz et al., 2014, p. 3, 2015, p. 283; Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2016, p. 3; Fitzpatrick et al., 2015, p. 1,983; Licoppe & Inada, 2009, p. 106; Miller et al., 2016, p. 120). Spatial proximity involves a geographic concept, referring to the short relative distance between individuals (Y. Huang, Shen, & Contractor, 2013, p. 970; Pancs & Vriend, 2007, p. 2; Urry, 1985, pp. 20–48). Using mobile-based social networking applications to find and communicate with close-by strangers, young people’s practices challenge civil inattention in urban spaces. These applications integrate stranger social plug-ins with location-awareness, enabling young people to find and communicate with strangers who share spatial proximity with them (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 99; Farman, 2012, pp. 72–73; Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011, pp. 77–78; Miller et al., 2016, p. 122). For instance, WeChat has three stranger social plug-ins. Two of these are location-based services facilitating users to locate the spatial position of strangers. Using these location-based stranger social plug-ins allows Chinese young people to release stress through talking to strangers who live nearby and possibly developing friendship/romance with them (Miller et al., 2016, p. 108).

In this chapter, I argue that urban Chinese young people may use mobile-based social networking applications as interfaces to negotiate social encounters with strangers in urban spaces. In particular, these applications may transform spatial proximity into an attentive affect when these young people encounter close-by strangers. The attentive affect of spatial proximity not only tempts these young people to pay attention to close-by strangers but also influence the spatial

propinquity between them. This encourages social interactions between two young people; despite the fact that they do not know each other prior to their encounters on these applications. This approach synthesises affect theory and new materialism within a consideration of urban Chinese youths' urban life experiences; it helps articulate how social interactions on mobile-based social networking applications are coordinated in relation to these young people's everyday engagement with and experiences of spaces. Through critically engaging in a discussion of the empirical evidence gathered from the present netnographic enquiry, the analysis uncovers how Chinese college students use WeChat to interact with nearby strangers. While Chinese college students are pioneer young people who lead the trend of WeChat use in China, the empirical findings neatly demonstrate that the digital social norms to which these young people adhere on the mobile-based social networking application has challenged *civil inattention* in urban spaces in contemporary China. The salient points addressed in this chapter are as follows:

(1) How Chinese young people use mobile-based social networking applications to find and communicate with strangers who share spatial proximity with them. How this challenges civil inattention in urban cities and why.

(2) How Chinese college students negotiate social encounters with strangers on mobile-based social networking applications for friendships and romance.

(3) How the design of mobile-based social networking applications transforms spatial proximity into an attentive affect that influences the social propinquity between strangers.

### 6.2 Strangers and Civil Inattention

Scholars, such as Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007, p. 1,144, 2011, p. 873), and Wasko and Faraj (2013, p. 42), have addressed the benefits of interacting with strangers by drawing on the concept of social capital. Social capital is the resources embedded in our durable connections with other social members (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1986, 1989, 1990b, 1991; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Coleman, 1988; Erickson, 1996; N. Lin, 2002; R. Ling, 2008). It may satisfy young people's personal needs, such as seeking 'emotional support' (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 873). Social capital exists in the connections between those who are already known to each other

and relates to both strong ties (bonding close friends and family members) and weak ties (bonding casual friends and acquaintances) (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1,360; Hampton & Wellman, 2002, pp. 543–544; Marsden & Campbell, 1984, pp. 482–484). However, latent ties, which bond strangers, also comprise social capital potential (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 877; Haythornthwaite, 2002, p. 385, 2005, p. 125). This is because, although a latent tie is 'technically possible but not yet activated socially', continuous interactions may activate the latent tie and convert it to a weak or even a strong one (Haythornthwaite, 2005, p. 137). For instance, complete strangers may become known to us if they talk to us in person; and then become friends with us if we exchange mobile phone numbers to keep in touch with each other. From the perspective of young people, socialising with strangers allows them to expand personal networks, thereby accumulating social capital. This has been exemplified by a series of studies which found that many young people in both the West and China are receptive to strangers and willing to make friends with them (boyd, 2010, p. 96; Mary Madden et al., 2013, pp. 12–13).

Valuing the social capital potential of latent ties, young people might be desirous of interacting with strangers. This desire, however, seems to be frustrated when these young people encounter strangers who share spatial proximity with them in urban cities. Spatial proximity was a term used by micro-economist Schelling (1969, 1971, 1972, 1974, 1978) to describe a spatial phenomenon in business operations (Pancs & Vriend, 2007, p. 2). This phenomenon refers to the great attention individual businesses pay to the 'composition of their own local neighbourhood' which is geographically close to them (Pancs & Vriend, 2007, p. 2). In the context of everyday lives, spatial proximity can be extended to a human-geographic dimension, describing the short relative distance between individuals (Y. Huang et al., 2013, p. 970; Urry, 1985, pp. 20–48). Today, young people who live in cities pass by many strangers exhibiting different characteristics. However, they are discouraged from interacting with these nearby strangers, because of the rise of *civil inattention* in modern urban spaces (Baldwin, 2004, p. 396; Finkelstein, 2007, p. 109; Goffman, 1972, p. 385).

The notion of *civil inattention* comes from a comparison between rural residence and urban dwelling (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 29; Goffman, 1963, pp. 132–133). Residents in the rural area usually acknowledge each other's presence through

greetings and phatic communications when encountering each other in the street (Goffman, 1963, pp. 132–133). This is because the small size of the population of a rural village determines that the residents are very likely to know or at least know of each other, and most probably will meet each other again within a short period of time (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 29). However, the rapid growth of population in modern cities, on the contrary, does not allow urban dwellers to recognise every single person who lives in the same city. Encountering others who were previously unknown has become a ubiquitous experience amongst contemporary urban dwellers. These urban dwellers, therefore, usually come across the experience of being alienated in urban spaces because 'there grew up a notion that strangers had no right to speak to each other, that each man possessed as a public right an invisible shield, a right to be left alone' (Bull, 2007, p. 27). This experience is referred to as civil inattention, which describes the inappropriateness of interactions between strangers who share spatial proximity in urban spaces.

Civil inattention is a consequence of urbanisation (Crary, 2001, p. 13). From the industrial revolution onwards, the number of dwellers in Western major cities has witnessed a huge expansion because of the migration from the rural area (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 29). For instance, the population of London dramatically grew over 60 times from approximately 750,000 to more than five million in the 19$^{th}$ century alone (Sennett, 1977, p. 50). The statistics from the United Nations (2014, p. 1) show that almost four billion members of the world population live in urban cities, an increase of five times since the 1950s. Paralleling this global trend, China's urbanisation rate has reached its all-time highest, with more than half of the Chinese population living in urban areas today (The UN, 2014, p. 2). In particular, modern urban areas in China are more densely populated than those of Western countries (The UN, 2014, p. 2; Wu & Logan, 2015, p. 1). Research has already found evidence of civil inattention in China: the decrease of interactions among neighbouring residents in urban cities (Zhu et al., 2012, p. 2,439). Civil inattention, fostered by the expansion of urban population, has become a shared urban living experience both in the West and in the East.

### 6.3 Spatial Proximity and Challenges to Civil Inattention

Urban young people's adoption of mobile-based social networking applications, however, challenges civil inattention, producing digital social norms that

paradoxically encourage social interactions between nearby strangers in urban spaces. For instance, Fitzpatrick and Birnholtz (2016) conducted interviews with 22 young men in the US who use Grindr regularly. Their research uncovers how these young men use the mobile-based social networking application to socialise with strangers of the same sex who live nearby for dates or sexual encounters (Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2016, p. 2). Similarly, a series of ethnographic enquiries have been conducted by Miller et al. (2016, p. v) in nine different fieldsites across the world. Their comprehensive research project clearly demonstrates that social interactions between close-by strangers have become increasingly normalised among young people who use mobile-based social networking applications in urban spaces across the globe (Miller et al., 2016). While some young people interact with nearby strangers for releasing stress or coping with boredom, others see this as a means to make friends or find (casual sex) partners (Miller et al., 2016, pp. 17–18).

More and more urban young people use mobile-based social networking applications to negotiate social encounters with nearby strangers. This challenges civil inattention, requiring a conceptual understanding of the role in which mobile-based social networking applications play. Before the digital era, interpersonal interactions were primarily organised between persons who shared spatial proximity because they had to meet each other in person in order to interact (Tomlinson, 1999, 2003). During the past century, we, however, have witnessed how technological innovation changes our interaction practices (Baym, 2010; Y. Huang et al., 2013). Nowadays, without meeting in person, we have a number of alternative ways to communicate with other people (e.g. making a phone call, writing an e-mail, or sending an instant message). These ways of communication are particularly important when great geographic distance exists between communication partners (Lambert, 2013, p. 77). For instance, Madianou and Miller (2012, 2013) found that Facebook and Skype have become the primary communication channels helping Philippine migrant workers in the UK to maintain the emotional bonds with their left-behind children in the home country. With a particular focus on strangers, Haythornthwaite (2002, p. 389, 2005, p. 137) also noted that being registered in the same e-mail list provides professionals an opportunity to interact with someone who lives miles away and was previously unknown to them.

Emphasising the facilitation of communication over distance owing to the spread of digital communication technologies, Castells (2000, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2009) argued that we have entered a fluid and dynamic society in which the role of each individual social member is not fixed. In this dynamic society, traditional territory and neighbourhood-based communities collapse and are replaced by a holistic networked social structure (Miyata, Boase, Wellman, & Ikeda, 2005; B Wellman, 2001; Barry Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002). However, while acknowledging the changes that digital communication technologies bring about, many observers, such as Cairncross (1997; 2001) and Friedman (2007), exaggerated the consequences, claiming that the world has become 'flat' and that the distance is already 'dead'. They suggest that, nowadays, the importance of face-to-face communication has been diminished and given way to technologically-facilitated communication (Putnam, 2000). By using digital communication channels, young people are able to form a purely technologically-connected social relationship. This form of relationship overcomes spatial distance, enabling young people to socialise with complete strangers without geographic constraints (Ashton, 2007, p. 212).

The above research literature clearly shows an endorsement of a simplified model of society in which young people, as well all other social members carrying different characteristics, are reduced to single nodes connected through available communication channels (Castells, 2000, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2009). Undoubtedly seductive, this networked model of society overlooks the spatiality of technology-assisted communication (Brewer & Dourish, 2008; Dourish, 2006). This oversight reproduces a virtual/physical dualist approach, which sees technology-facilitated communication as a practice taking place in a homogenised virtual space, which serves as a binary opposite to face-to-face communication taking place in physical spaces (Damm, 2007; Hil & Bessant, 1999; Markham, 1998). Virtual/physical dualism fails to acknowledge that any form of our social interaction has to be practised in relation to space because the digital communication technologies never withdraw users from their immediate surroundings (Brewer & Dourish, 2008; Dourish, 2006). As articulated in the previous chapters, space is 'practised place' (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117). The construction of a space involves 'thing-power', comprising the consequences of a human's bodily encounters with immediate surroundings. Following a synthesis of new materialism and symbolic interactionism, we can say that digital communication technologies of any kind never create virtual spaces

detached from physical spaces (Dourish, 2006, pp. 300–301). Instead, these technologies function as interfaces, which facilitate users to interact through traversing spaces.

Before the prevalence of smart mobile phones, this interface function of digital communication technologies, such as social networking applications, was not apparent because the use of these technologies often limited users' mobility. While accessing social networking applications on a laptop or desktop computer in a fixed location, young people's bodily encounters with surroundings were usually predictable, and did not, therefore, manifest significant influences on their interactional practices (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2010, p. 485, 2012, p. 165; de Souza e Silva & Sutko, 2011, p. 7). However, mobile-based social networking applications are accessed via portable devices, which are used while travelling in urban spaces (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 163). Young people's engagement with space, thus, becomes highly dynamic. This makes the interface function of mobile-based social networking applications important in framing their everyday engagement with and experiences of urban spaces (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 164; Farman, 2012, p. 4).

The interface function of mobile-based social networking applications is articulated in the ways in which young people use the applications to negotiate social encounters with other social members in urban spaces. Interfaces are the meeting points of 'social and cultural dynamics', which transform 'the relations between bodies and their environments' (Gane & Beer, 2008, p. 61). An interface facilitates interactions between bodies and objects situated in spaces which were relatively independent prior to the interaction. For example, Skype is designed for video chatting (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Two young people may use Skype to interact, even though they are thousands of miles away from each other. The two young people, to a certain extent, agree to pay primary attention to each other as soon as they start the video chat. However, this does not withdraw the two young people from the spaces in which they are physically situated. Their engagement with the spaces may also require attention, possibly distracting their attention from the interaction. For instance, the interaction between two young people on Skype may be disrupted, if one of them is approached by a third party face-to-face. In this sense, the use of digital

communication technologies as interfaces reflects how young people manage their attention to engage in an encouraged interaction.

In particular, contemporary young people who live in modern cities are often overwhelmed by the stimulators that constantly vie for their attention (Crogan & Kinsley, 2012, pp. 23–24; Goldhaber, 1997). Continuous encounters with strangers in urban cities are one of the causes (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 33; Simmel & Wolff, 1964, p. 410). Inhabiting urban spaces which are busy and crowded, today's young people are constantly moving and passing through crowds. The different people and different things that they encounter require their attention (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 33; Simmel & Wolff, 1964, p. 410). These urban young people are nearly always paying attention to these stimulators (Goldhaber, 2006). They are in need of managing their limited amount of attention. An interface encourages a certain mode of interaction. While engaging in the encouraged interaction, these young people are able to withdraw a certain amount of attention they pay to other stimulators in the urban spaces. Thus, interfaces can be used to manage young people's attention in order to cope with the sensory stimulation of the urban spaces (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 45–46).

The ways in which young people challenge civil inattention involve the interface function of mobile-based social networking applications, which are designed specifically to facilitate interactions between strangers who share spatial proximity in urban spaces. Pioneer technologies in this genre, such as LooptMix, enable users to discover those who live nearby but were previously unknown to them (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011, p. 79). Brightkite allows users to locate strangers who are 200 m (within a block), 2 km (in the neighbourhood), 4 km (in the area), 10 km (in the city), or 100 km (in the region) away from their current location (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011, pp. 79–80). These technologies utilise GPS signal to locate each individual user's geographical position. In order to activate an interaction, users of these technologies have to be geographically close to each other. This mode of social interaction, which is primarily negotiated by sharing spatial proximity between strangers, has been well accepted by today's young people who use mobile-based social networking applications regularly. Representative examples, such as Tinder, enable young people to search for close-by strangers of the opposite sex for dates or sexual encounters (Miller et al., 2016, p. 122; Sumter et al., 2017, p. 68). In a similar

vein, Grindr is designed to help gay men to find sexual or dating partners who are nearby (Birnholtz et al., 2014, p. 3; Fitzpatrick & Birnholtz, 2016, pp. 5–6). Both applications have attracted huge numbers of Western young people's participation (Miller et al., 2016, p. 107). This neatly demonstrates that the digital social norms to which these young people adhere do challenge civil inattention in urban spaces by legitimising social interactions between close-by strangers.

### 6.3.1 *WeChat Stranger Social Plug-Ins*

Similar to the above mobile-based social networking applications, WeChat integrates three stranger social plug-ins. Two plug-ins, namely 'People Nearby' and 'Shake', are location-aware, while the other one – 'Drift Bottle' – is not. (1) The 'People Nearby' plug-in (see Figure 11) locates a user's current position and shares the information with other users (WeChat, n.d.-a). Users may check in 'People Nearby' to make their location information and 10 latest Moments updates available to other users who are at most 10 km away from them. At the same time, the users may also find strangers who live nearby (at most 10 km away from the user as well) or have 'checked in' at the place recently. In particular, the profiles of strangers are listed according to geographic distance (from close to far way), allowing users to firstly identify those who share spatial proximity with them. (2) 'Shake' plug-in (Figure 12) also locates users' location, but it functions in a different way (WeChat, n.d.-b). By clicking the 'Shake' button and shaking the mobile device, users can share their current locative information, alongside their profile images, with strangers who is also using this plug-in. The users, therefore, can decide with which stranger they want to interact, depending on their spatial proximity. (3) The 'Drift Bottle' plug-in (Figure 13) enables users to communicate with strangers as well, but the plug-in does not support locative awareness (Imran, 2014). WeChat 'Drift Bottle' plug-in is similar to how a real drift bottle works. A user can write a message and upload onto the system as a 'Drift Bottle'. The message will be sent to a stranger who 'picks up' the 'Drift Bottle'. Generally, 'People Nearby' and 'Shake' allow users to find those strangers who share spatial proximity them, while 'Drift Bottle' does not. The ways in which my Chinese college students' participants use these stranger social plug-ins provide a glimpse into how social encounters between strangers on mobile-based

social networking applications[24] are negotiated by sharing spatial proximity and how their digital social norms in this respect are produced.


Figure 11. Stranger Social Plug-in – 'People Nearby'

N.B. Yellow Circle Highlights the Relative Geographic Distance between Users

[24] It is undeniable that the launch of stranger social plug-ins is a dimension of the affective design of WeChat. The primary aim of this design is to tempt users to pay constant attention to and spend time on the application (For details see Chapter 4 – An Affective Account of Digital Social Norms). However, my interactions with my research participants revealed that – while the time many of them spent on stranger social plug-ins was wasted, seven admitted that they have quite a few friends made in this way. These instances neatly demonstrate that making friends through stranger social plug-ins is not a complete fantasy.

Figure 12. Stranger Social Plug-in – ‘Shake’

N.B. Yellow Circle Highlights the Relative Geographic Distance between Users

Figure 13. Stranger Social Plug-in – 'Drift Bottle'


Figure 14. A Message Received through 'Drift Bottle'

### 6.4 Social Encounters with Nearby Strangers: Friendship and Romance

The present netnographic enquiry discovered that 15 out of my 19 Chinese college student participants have used WeChat's stranger social plug-ins. While almost all said they mainly use the plug-ins for passing the time, seven have successfully developed friendships with strangers they encountered on WeChat. My participants use the plug-ins to find strangers, browse their WeChat profiles and Moments updates, talk to and even make friends with them. This reflects these young people's desire for emotional support after moving away from home for university in an unfamiliar city. Participant Di, for instance, provides a good illustration. The 21-year-old is a Fourth Year female college student who comes from the Northern China – more than 2,500 km away from the city in which her university is located. Di only meets her parents twice a year, during the summer and winter holidays. Di said that living alone in a completely new environment makes her feel lonely 'every now and then'. Not all Chinese college students have travelled 2,500 km to attend universities, but Di's feelings of loneliness are not unusual. Contemporary Chinese college students are typical of the post-90s younger generation in the Far-East country, who often grew up in a one-child family and still share a close relationship with their parents (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 702). Moving away from the familial home for the first

time to study in a strange city without their parents and old friends' company, these young people may easily encounter stress, loneliness, and homesickness (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 702). Nevertheless, there are occasions that family members and friends are not available for communication. At these times, young people may seek other ways to cope with the negative feelings: one of the possible solutions is to use WeChat to socialise with strangers[25] (Miller et al., 2016, p. 108). While Chinese college students interact with strangers so as to temporarily ease their boredom and fill their spare time, some gradually find that these interactions may also be a way to make more friends.

Interestingly, sharing spatial proximity is used by Chinese college students to negotiate social interactions with strangers on WeChat. For example, participant Ci has used all the stranger social plug-ins available on WeChat but he appreciates 'People Nearby' the most. He clearly said that one of the most important reasons for this preference is because the 'People Nearby' plug-in allows him to find strangers who are close-by. When using 'People Nearby', spatial proximity is a prerequisite for activating social interactions between strangers. This forms a spatial proximity-negotiated mode of encounters in which Chinese young people engage for friendship or romance. Participant Ci is representative of the participants interviewed. Other participants, such as Ning also suggested that he prefers to 'be friends with' strangers who are found not far away from him, despite the fact that the 19-year-old uses both 'Shake' and 'People Nearby'. As Ning noted,

> I use 'Shake' to find those who are around me… (I) sometimes use 'Drift Bottle' (to find strangers) as well, but this only happens when I am really bored and have no one to talk to… I use this only for killing time and it (the communication with strangers found through 'Drift Bottle') often does last long…
>
> Ning

The above male students' practices are not isolated examples but generally shared by both men and women among my participants who use stranger social plug-ins. As the present netnographic enquiry shows, many Chinese college students admitted that they consider strangers who share spatial proximity as preferable

[25] Please also see Chapter 4 – An Affective Account of Digital Social Norms.

communication partners on a long-term basis. They are highly unlikely to keep in touch with strangers who were found on ‘Drift Bottle’ and were thousands of miles away from where they live. Scrutinising through an affective lens, we may find that these particular digital social norms to which these young people adhere on WeChat are encouraged by the design of the mobile-based social networking application, which uses location-based stranger social plug-ins to transform spatial proximity into an attentive affect. This affect tempts Chinese young people to negotiate social encounters with strangers primarily based upon sharing spatial proximity in urban spaces. An affect is the effect of an encounter between different bodies (Ash, 2015a, pp. 84–85; Patricia Ticineto Clough, 2010, pp. 224–225). An affect requires bodies to generate an affective response, opening up the bodies to new capacities for action (Blackman, 2013, p. 186; Massumi, 2002, p. 25). An understanding of affect helps articulate how a human’s conscious and discursive practices are affected at a pre-conscious and non-discursive level through their bodily encounters with objects and technologies (Ash, 2015a, pp. 84–85; Blackman, 2013, p. 186).

Attentive affect primarily tempts users’ visual sense and encourages users to pay attention (Ash, 2012, pp. 7–8; Stiegler, 2010b, p. 18). This is one of the most important forms of affects emerging when young people use mobile-based social networking applications[26]. For instance, these technologies may transform an incoming message into an attentive affect via activating ringtone and vibration, encouraging the user to pay attention to and respond to it. Spatial proximity measures the relative geographic distance between two persons’ bodies. WeChat stranger social plug-ins, however, may transform spatial proximity into an attentive affect, when the encounter between two strangers is interfaced through WeChat. As soon as they access ‘People Nearby’ and ‘Shake’, one of the most notable terms of information that young people may find is the relative distance between strangers (see the highlighted yellow circles in Figure 15 and Figure 16 respectively). Sharing spatial proximity sounds abstract to users, but the plug-ins visualise it as observable relative distance data displayed on the mobile screen. This transforms spatial proximity into an attentive affect that enables Chinese college students to pay attention to those strangers who share spatial proximity with them.

[26] For details please see Chapter 4 – An Affective Account of Digital Social Norms.


Figure 15. 'People Nearby' Zoom In

N.B. The Yellow Circles Highlight the Relative Geographic Distance

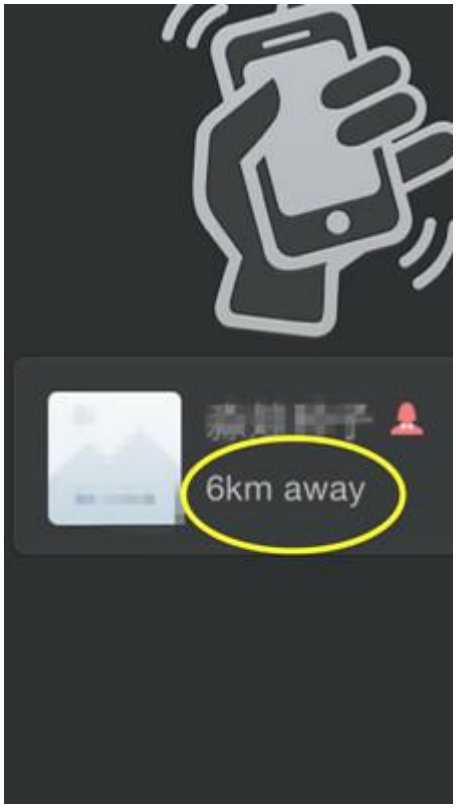


Figure 16. ‘Shake’ Zoom In

N.B. The Yellow Circle Highlights the Relative Geographic Distance

Transforming spatial proximity into an attentive affect, the architecture of the stranger social plug-ins also encourages Chinese young people to negotiate social encounters with strangers based upon sharing spatial proximity. On ‘People Nearby’, for instance, strangers’ profiles are ranked from ‘very close’ to ‘far away’ according to the relative distance between them (see Figure 12 and Figure 15 for the order of strangers’ profiles). As the order prioritises the display of strangers who share spatial proximity, young people are invited to pay primary attention to these close-by strangers. A similar situation is found on ‘Shake’ plug-in as well. When shaking their mobile phones, young people can find the profiles of strangers who exhibit different characteristics but are simultaneously shaking their mobile phones. Yet again, the matching between ‘less distanced’ strangers is primarily supported, reflecting that these young people are more likely to encounter someone who is nearby when they use the plug-in. Furthermore, ‘People Nearby’ and ‘Shake’ do not share one’s locative information automatically. Bodily actions (clicking on the ‘People Nearby’ button or shaking mobile phones) are required when Chinese college students use these plug-ins. The required bodily actions symbolise an agreement of participation, notifying other users that one is willing to be found by other users who are close-by but not yet known to him or her. This particular design of ‘People Nearby’ and ‘Shake’ effectively encourages Chinese young people to notice close-by strangers and then socialise with them.

By socialising with strangers who are close-by on WeChat, Chinese college students are able to develop new personal circles. This allows them to accrue empathy and emotional support from these newly made friends in a new environment devoid of parents and old friends’ company. Participant Di, for instance, said that one of her best friends in the university initially become known to her when they met each other on the ‘People Nearby’ plug-in. Interestingly, a gender difference surfaces when I scrutinise how female and male participants socialise with close-by strangers on WeChat respectively. In general, I found male Chinese college students are much more likely to be the one who initiates social interactions if the encounters take place between strangers of the opposite sex. This is because the opportunity for romantic encounters is entwined in the social interactions between male and female young people on mobile-based social networking applications (Sumter et al., 2017, pp. 68–69). Romantic relationships become more serious for young people in their late teens and early 20s (Garcia, Seibold-Simpson, Massey, & Merriwether, 2011, p. 205;

Sumter et al., 2017, p. 69). In particular, young men tend to attach importance to the 'physical need of sexual gratification' when encountering female strangers on mobile-based social networking applications (Sumter et al., 2017, p. 69). They tend to be more active in socialising with strangers of the opposite sex compared to their female counterparts (Sumter et al., 2017, p. 69).

The gender differences discovered in the present netnographic enquiry, therefore, reflect the gendered negotiation of romantic encounters between male and female young people in China. These findings resonate with Yin, Zhang, Xie, Zou, and Huang's (2013, p. 1) exploration of gender differences in the perception of romance amongst Chinese college students, which found that male students are more active than female students in pursuing partners in a romantic relationship. Similar to Di's experience, participant Ning has developed friendships through his use of WeChat's location-based stranger social plug-ins as well. However, the 19-year-old young man's motive was of direct relevance to his desire for romantic encounters. Ning admitted that he personally feels that female strangers are far more attractive than male strangers. While Ning almost never communicates with male strangers, he often sends greetings to female strangers and is willing to add them on WeChat if they respond to him. Ning hesitated in confessing this in our first in-person meeting owing to the sensitivity of this topic. However, after several-week message correspondences on WeChat which helped me gain sufficient trust from him, Ning eventually confessed that his present relationship status explains why he is willing to socialise with opposite-sex strangers when he uses WeChat's stranger social plug-ins.

> Be honest with you. I am still single at the moment… I guess this is common sense… I mean… Available boys are entitled to chase girls… So I use this (stranger social plug-ins on WeChat) to find and then talk to girls who are available as well.
>
> Ning

As Ning noted, he is hoping to encounter close-by strangers with whom he might develop an intimate relationship. Many other male participants also agreed with Ning's interpretation. Some of the braver participants honestly confessed that they want to find dates, while others were evasive in their answers. Nevertheless, almost

all my male participants said or implied that close-by female strangers are preferable communication partners for them on WeChat stranger social plug-ins. The above examples neatly show that male Chinese college students' use of location-based stranger social plug-ins is often associated with their intention to develop romantic relationships. This resonates with the empirical findings by Miller et al. (2016, p. 122), revealing how small numbers of married male Chinese young adults organise affairs through WeChat location-based stranger social plug-ins. Conversely, female participants in the present enquiry often suggested that they may approach close-by strangers of the same sex, but rarely initiate interactions with male strangers when they use WeChat location-based stranger social plug-ins. This by no means indicates that female Chinese college students have no desire to meet up with boys at all; instead, through continuous contact with the female research participants, I realised that many of them also acknowledge the dating opportunities that WeChat location-based stranger social plug-ins bring about. However, these young women tend to use the plug-ins in a seemingly passive way, waiting to be approached by their male colleagues[27]. For instance, participant Chen is a third-year female college student. The 21-year-old noted that she 'occasionally' leaves her locative traces on 'People Nearby' because this allows 'other users' to find and then talk to her.

> I use 'People Nearby', but I do not talk to anyone unless he talks to me first… Well, I cannot really explain why I behave in this way… Probably, (this is) just a 'girls' habit'… Like in a romantic encounter: when a gentleman meets a lady in person for the first time. He is supposed to start the conversation with the lady, not vice versa.
>
> Chen

Male and female Chinese college students' different practices, to a certain extent, are also a reflection of the gender inequality in China reproduced amongst young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications (Miller et al., 2016, p. 122). Chinese traditional culture is patriarchal, treating women as subordinate to men (Higgins & Sun, 2007, p. 32; Nussbaum & Glover, 1995, p. 413; Xie, 2013, p. 3). This traditional culture advocates 'female interiority' with 'women being historically

[27] Many female students admitted that they were too shy to share the 'truth' with me at the beginning of their participation in the present research. However, my continuous interactions with them on WeChat helped me gain these female students' trust and eventually find out the 'true stories' in their everyday use of stranger social plug-ins.

confined to the domestic sphere' (Miller et al., 2016, p. 122). Since the middle of the 20th century, arranged marriage has been prohibited in China, giving Chinese women 'the right to marry the person of their own choice' (Rai, 1995, p. 182). Yet, the long history of masculine domination still influences how contemporary Chinese young people think and behave, amid the significant rise of their social status over the past six decades (Xie, 2013, p. 5). In particular, in romantic encounters, the remaining gender inequality requires women to be more cautious and act in a seemingly passive way: They are supposed to be pursued by the opposite sex rather than vice versa. Failure to adhere to this convention may result in a stigma being attached to a woman's reputation (e.g. she may be accused of being 'bold' or even a 'slut'). Thus, the technological architecture of WeChat's stranger social plug-ins certainly encourages Chinese young women to socialise with close-by strangers of the opposite sex for dates, possibly challenging the historical gender inequality in the East Asian country as well. However, Chinese young women, at the same time, are frustrated by the patriarchal socio-cultural context, which discourages challenges to the masculine domination. Having grown up in a culture of 'female interiority', most of these young women do not dare to express their desire freely, leading to their conservative actions when they encounter close-by, opposite-sex strangers on WeChat[28].

The present netnographic enquiry found that Chinese college students' use of WeChat stranger social plug-ins does not challenge gender inequality in China. However, it produces digital social norms that legitimise social interactions between close-by strangers. In particular, the social interactions between close-by strangers not only happen amongst those who are of the opposite sex but also occur amongst the same sex. This allows Chinese young people to pay a little innocent game, facilitating young men to chase close-by strangers of their opposite sex for romantic encounters. This also enables Chinese young people to make friends with the same sex when they share spatial proximity in urban spaces, despite having no pre-existing knowledge of each other's presence. While social interactions between close-by strangers are legitimised, civil inattention is ultimately challenged, despite the fact that it has spread extensively amongst urban spaces in both China and the

[28] This also involves female students' privacy concerns. For details please see Chapter 7 – Spatial Privacy and Spatial Collateral Surveillance.

rest of the world before the emergence of mobile-based social networking applications.

### 6.6 From Spatial Proximity to Social Propinquity

The architecture of location-based stranger social plug-ins encourages Chinese young people to interact with close-by strangers, but it does not determine how these young people think and behave. Mediating the digital social norms that challenge civil inattention, spatial proximity has to work on a preconscious and non-discursive level to generate social propinquity between strangers when they encounter each other on WeChat. This allows spatial proximity to articulate its affectivity, tempting Chinese college students to actually socialise with close-by strangers on WeChat. Social propinquity refers to one's psychological feeling of the level of closeness to other people (Doring & Poschl, 2010; Dufwenberg & Muren, 2006, p. 46; Fiedler et al., 2011, p. 400; Kazdin, 2000). As Doring and Poschl (2010, p. 114) note, social propinquity produces 'a sense of connection, similarity, solidarity, openness, and understanding' that emerges with the one's awareness of similarities and differences regarding other social members (Hipp & Perrin, 2009, p. 6). In other words, social propinquity helps people to make sense of their self-identity and thereby behave accordingly when encountering other social members (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 12). Thus, social propinquity has a significant impact on the ways in which people interact (Y. Huang et al., 2013, p. 969). Two people with a higher level of social propinquity are more likely to activate interactions (Cox & Deck, 2005; Y. Fan, 2002; Fiedler et al., 2011; Hipp & Perrin, 2009, p. 7; Y. Huang et al., 2013, p. 976; Karakayali, 2009, p. 557).

Sharing spatial proximity may generate a feeling of social propinquity between Chinese college students who have no knowledge of each other's presence prior to their encounters on WeChat location-based stranger social plug-ins. This is particularly important when male students find and communicate with opposite-sex strangers for friendship or romantic encounters because the self-identity of these young people also encompasses a spatial sense, which refers to their everyday engagement with urban spaces. Urban dwellers' everyday engagement with urban spaces provides a glimpse into their identity (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015; Walker & Moulton, 1989; Wilson, 1992). This is because, as Schwartz and Halegoua (2015, p. 5) explain, urban dwellers' locality and mobility also reflect 'relationships between

social class, gender dynamics, public and private spaces, and the city'. For example, Moores' (2012, pp. 94–102) interviews with 20 young Eastern European Migrants living in London revealed that these young people's emotional attachment to the city had developed through their everyday engagement with urban spaces, such as living in a particular building or frequently passing by the same corner shop. The emotional attachment contribute to their sense of belonging, becoming an important part of their identity primarily developed upon their life experiences within the urban city (Moores, 2012). Chinese college students are typical of the younger generation who enjoy urban living in China. Studying at a university where they are likely to be staying for four years or even longer, these students begin developing an emotional attachment to the campus and the city as soon as they start their programme. While their engagement with their surroundings increasingly defines a spatial dimension of their identity, spatial proximity is, thereby, able to affect the social propinquity between these young people when they encounter each other on WeChat. This affective process is demonstrated by the incident in which Di encountered her best friend first time on 'Shake'.

> It was probably the first time I noticed this function (the 'Shake' plug-in) on WeChat… I follow the instruction appearing on the screen, click the button, and then shake my phone… A while later, a complete stranger's 'head portrait' (profile) appears on the screen. It shows that she is less than 1 km away from me… We were so close… I am sure she must be a student studying at the same university with me… I feel that I have to say 'hello' to her.
>
> Di

This is Di's description of how she found her best friend at the university through the 'Shake' plug-in. At that time, she was in her university dormitory with no roommates around. However, the 'Shake' plug-in reminded Di that she was not alone – there was another student living just nearby. A feeling of shared social propinquity was generated as soon as they noticed how close they were to each other. In particular, Di guessed that the girl was also a student at the same university – who might like to make friends with her. This happened in Di's second year; she had already developed an emotional attachment to the university and the university campus. Being a student of the university and living on the university campus comprises an important spatial dimension of Di's self-identity. In particular, Chinese universities'

student accommodations are dormitories strictly operated within campuses (Jian-bin, 2009; Jinsong, 2007). A typical Chinese college student's range of mobility is, therefore, to a certain extent, limited within the boundaries of the university campus which are clearly defined by physical walls and fences. While this particular accommodation system discourages the intervention with local communities outside campus, it also constructs spatial proximity-defined peer communities among the universities in China. Thus, the girl Di encountered on WeChat was previously unknown to her. However, the stranger social plug-in transforms spatial proximity into an attentive affect; this tempted Di to pay attention to it as soon as she noticed the other girl's close-by presence. The association between short relative distance and belonging to the same peer community then amplified the affectivity of spatial proximity when Di encountered the close-by stranger. A sense of propinquity arose, which encouraged Di to send a greeting to her.

Di said that it was very fortunate because her initial guess was accurate – the girl she encountered on 'Shake' was a student at the same university with her. Furthermore, the student also came from Di's hometown. They were even in the same academic department but had never talked to each other before. Di almost forgot how they started the conversation, but still recollected a strong kinship-like feeling emerging during their phatic communication. Di caught up with the girl at lunchtime the next day. The pair has been best friends at the university since then. Di's experience is not unique. The present netnographic enquiry with my participants revealed that: when these young people use WeChat stranger social plug-ins, most do so with the expectation that the strangers who are found close-by are peer students who study at the same university. Social propinquity is also fostered by this expectation, which then informs their preference for close-by strangers when they use location-based stranger social plug-ins on WeChat. In particular, the social propinquity amplified by spatial proximity manifests great importance when two young students who were previously unknown to each other have the intention to develop a relationship. As participant Euc, a Year 2 male college student, mentioned, romantic encounters comprise one of the most important reasons explaining why he uses WeChat location-based stranger social plug-ins, namely 'People Nearby' and 'Shake'.

> I use ‘Shake’, and sometimes ‘People Nearby’, to (find and then) talk to female users…, because (the stranger social plug-ins with locative awareness) allow me to find peer female students who also study at our university easily… I believe we share more in common than others who have already stepped into society.
>
> Euc

Euc and Di’s experiences are not isolated examples but generally shared among those students who use ‘People Nearby’ and/or ‘Shake’ in their everyday lives. Because they share parallel life experiences, Chinese college students are more likely to build trust, foster mutual understandings, and share similar personal interests with peers who study at the same university (Higgins & Sun, 2007, p. 40). The location-based stranger social plug-ins on WeChat make Chinese college students aware of a number of strangers who are geographically close to them. In particular, these students’ self-identity, which comprises membership of peer communities in the university, is also spatially constructed in relation to their constant engagement with the campus. Sharing spatial proximity, which reflects a level of similarities from a spatial perspective, thereby works from a pre-conscious and non-discursive level (honestly reflecting the actual relative distance between Chinese college students) to a conscious and discursive level (generating social propinquity between them). With the objective of developing a friendship (or a romantic relationship), male students are therefore encouraged to activate interactions with strangers who are found geographically close to them (and in particular of the opposite sex). This produces digital social norms that challenge civil inattention in urban spaces in the East Asian country. However, the design of a mobile-based social networking application certainly encourages young people to engage in certain practices. However, the technology does not have complete control over users’ thoughts and behaviour (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011, p. 3; Hjarvard, 2013, p. 2). In most scenarios, it only empowers them to explore what they want to do (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011, p. 3). Chinese young people’s choice and agency are also of significance to the mediation of digital social norms that define appropriate ways of negotiating social encounters between close-by strangers.

### 6.7 The Importance of Spatial Proximity

Using WeChat location-based stranger social plug-ins in urban cities, Chinese young people tend to talk to close-by strangers. While male college students often see this as a way to pursue a romantic relationship, female college students also acknowledge their opposite-sex peers' efforts, despite the fact that they tend to act in a seemingly passive mode. In social encounters between strangers, the importance of spatial proximity is not only a consequence of how the stranger social plug-ins encourage social interactions between close-by strangers, but also because the spatial distance is a constraint of continuous communications. Taking into consideration the spatial distance-associated costs, strangers are not likely to remain in contact without sharing spatial proximity. Zipf (1949) once found that urban dwellers tend to interact with those who share spatial proximity with them, as they are able to minimise the effort in travelling for in-person meetings. Thus, sharing spatial proximity usually means it is less costly to keep in touch. This also fosters the feeling of social propinquity – 'psychological closeness and mutuality' – between two strangers, encouraging them to activate interactions and remain in contact with each other (Doring & Poschl, 2010, p. 114). The spatial experience in contemporary society is certainly different from that observed by Zipf (1949) in the middle of the 20$^{th}$ century because technological innovation provides a variety of digital communication channels that facilitate interactions between distanced individuals. However, new communication channels never completely replace old ones (Madianou & Miller, 2012). In-person communication still represents an important form of everyday interaction, especially when we seek emotional support (Baym, 2010). In particular, in-person communication is often non-replaceable in the development of intimate friendships or romantic relationships among Chinese young people, as it allows these young people to easily gain emotional support from their newly made friends or partners when lonely feelings surface in their everyday lives.

The irreplaceability of in-person communication, alongside the affectivity of spatial proximity in generating social propinquity, also encourages Chinese college students' willingness to develop friendships or romance within their spatial proximity-defined peer community. A stranger social plug-in with no locative awareness, however, does not articulate users' spatiality. Therefore, it is of little help to satisfy Chinese college students' needs for friendship and romance in their everyday campus lives. In theory, all stranger social plug-ins on WeChat, location-aware or not, provide

Chinese college students with opportunities to develop connections with strangers. Yet, representative participant Cpy, a 20-year-old male student, noted that when he messages strangers who are found on ‘Drift Bottle’, his greetings are often ignored or only receive minimum responses. In the meantime, Cpy is likely to treat strangers in the same manner when they message him on this plug-in.

> Well… if you want to make friends, you would not go for ‘Drift Bottle’…, because it does not tell you where they (the strangers who he finds on the plug-in) are from. They may be thousands of miles away from you and share nothing in common with you… It is pointless to spend time on it unless you just want to kill time.
>
> Cpy

Cpy’s opinion is generally endorsed by almost all of the Chinese college students who participated in the present netnographic enquiry. Both male and female participants share a high level of consensus regarding their experiences of ‘Drift Bottle’ usage, seeing the plug-in as the tool mainly for passing time rather than making friends. As previously mentioned, ‘Drift Bottle’ is a stranger social plug-in with no location-awareness. The only characteristics of strangers that the plug-in reveals are their nickname and profile images, with no information regarding their location. Furthermore, the plug-in does not prioritise the potential connection of close-by strangers, meaning that the encounters often take place between strangers who are far away from each other and share different lifestyles. This design aspect of the plug-in imitates the experience of actually throwing a drift bottle into the sea – as its Graphic User Interface (GUI) explicitly simulates (see Figure 13 and Figure 14). The chances of encountering someone from the same university are extremely small, meaning that the effort that Chinese college students expend in using the plug-in is not worthwhile if they intend to find a friend or a partner in their university lives. This, as Cpy described, makes him feel that the strangers who he encounters on ‘Drift Bottle’ are ‘infinitely remote’ to him. This feeling discourages Cpy, as well as his university colleagues, from pursuing further communication with these strangers. This reinforces the idea that the cost of maintaining communication over distance discourages continuous interactions between spatially-distanced strangers, contributing to an environment which amplifies the affectivity of spatial proximity in generating social propinquity between strangers in urban spaces.

Spatial proximity, as a prerequisite for in-person interactions, manifests strong affectivity in engendering the social propinquity between acquaintances and strangers who share few existing emotional bonds, despite the existence of other digital communication channels (Hipp & Perrin, 2009; Y. Huang et al., 2013; Latane, Liu, Nowak, Bonevento, & Zheng, 1995; Olson & Olson, 2000). For instance, Hipp (2009, p. 11) conducted a survey of 150 households in the same area of the US. In accordance with my empirical findings of Chinese college students' practices on WeChat, their findings illustrate that those residents often choose to interact with those from neighbourhoods closest to them (Hipp & Perrin, 2009, p. 19). Similarly, Huang et al. (2013, p. 971) analysed the demographic information and collaborative activities among young people who participate in the same online role-playing games. Their findings also show that sharing spatial proximity can reduce social distance, increasing the possibility of communication between two young people who were previously unknown to each other (Y. Huang et al., 2013, p. 976). This evidence, which resonates with my empirical findings, has uncovered how sharing spatial proximity influences Western young people's social interactions with strangers on other digital communication technologies in urban spaces as well.

Throughout the above discussion, it has become apparent that civil inattention has been challenged by how Chinese young people experience and engage with contemporary urban spaces in an era in which mobile-based social networking applications are widely used. In particular, in the present netnographic enquiry, the city, in which their university is located, was often unfamiliar to my Chinese college student participants before they attended the university. These young people, however, are constantly developing their emotional attachment to the city through their everyday life experiences in the urban spaces. The emotional attachment to the city helps these young people to develop their spatially-defined self-identity – a belonging to the peer communities within the university campus. Spatial proximity thus becomes an indicator of social propinquity when they are deciding whether or not to communicate with a stranger on WeChat. Furthermore, in-person communication has unique benefits in emotion exchange (Baym, 2000, 2010). While in-person communication cannot be arranged without spatial proximity, spatial proximity still provides unique convenience when contemporary Chinese young people seek emotional support in urban spaces. When interacting with strangers for

friendships or romantic encounters, they tend to interact with those who are geographically close-by. This allows them to cross paths in the campus in the near future and then easily provide each other with emotional support after they become friends or partners. With the objective of making friends or finding partners, an increasingly number of Chinese young people are starting to use WeChat location-based stranger social plug-ins, namely ‘People Nearby’ and ‘Shake’, to socialise with close-by strangers, despite this having been discouraged by civil inattention before the emergence of these technologies.

The ways in which Chinese college students use WeChat to interact with close-by strangers exemplifies the interface function of the application. It provides urban Chinese young people with a level of freedom to manage their attention in urban spaces. Their use of the interfaces can be ambivalent. In particular scenarios, an interface might be used by young people to distance themselves from strangers who share spatial proximity with them in urban spaces (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 15). For example, on public transport, iPod users can put on earphones to notify others that they wish to be left alone (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 44). The technology gadget does not withdraw users’ bodies from the spaces, but it works as an interface, encouraging the interaction between the users’ bodies and the gadget. This distracts the users’ attention from their immediate surroundings, helping reduce their interactions with strangers who are also travelling on the vehicle.

However, while the alienation of urban life may encourage Chinese young people to reduce contact with strangers in certain scenarios, it may also empower them to take pleasure from encounters with strangers by ‘being drawn out of’ themselves in other scenarios as well (Crawford, 2008, p. 86). With the facilitation of location-based stranger social plug-ins, Chinese college students – those in the present study, for instance – are able to share their spatial position with other users on WeChat. The GUI of location-based stranger social plug-ins transforms spatial proximity into attentive affect, which tempts users to pay primary attention to strangers who share spatial proximity with them. This allows Chinese college students to easily find those who have membership of their spatially-defined peer communities but are not yet known to them. In particular, users are notifying strangers that they are willing to communicate when they use location-based stranger social plug-ins because the action required (checking in at a location or shaking their mobile phones) is a mutual

agreement of participation in stranger social activities. Chinese young people, therefore, may take pleasure from developing friendships or romantic relationships with those strangers who share spatial proximity with them.

The ways in which Chinese college students, as well as their peers in the West, use mobile-based social networking applications as interfaces to socialise with close-by strangers in urban spaces do not support Cairncross (1997; 2001) and Friedman's (2007) argument, which assumes that digital communication technologies enable young people to transcend distance. Instead, how these technologies are used always relates to the spatiality of users' bodies, allowing the young people to negotiate their engagement with and experiences of urban spaces. In particular, mobile-based social networking applications can be used as interfaces that facilitate users to explore the social capital involved in their encounters with strangers who share spatial proximity with them. These findings resonate with the previous chapters, showing that digital social norms are spatially-defined norms mediated in relation to how young people use mobile-based social networking applications as interfaces for experiencing the urban spaces in their everyday practices.

### 6.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed the ways in which urban Chinese youths negotiate social encounters with strangers on mobile-based social networking applications. This articulates aspects of the digital social norms to which these youths adhere with an emphasis on their social network management/expansion. Through the present netnographic enquiry, I found that Chinese college students, as a representative group of young people living in urban cities, may encounter many different strangers on WeChat, but they tend to communicate most with those who share spatial proximity with them. This shows that spatial proximity becomes a form of affect which generates social propinquity between people, despite the fact that they were previously unknown to each other (Dufwenberg & Muren, 2006, p. 46; Fiedler et al., 2011, p. 400; Kazdin, 2000). While using mobile-based social networking applications, the affectivity of spatial proximity is then amplified by location-based stranger social plug-ins integrated into these applications. This affect encourages these young people to interact with close-by strangers, mediating digital social norms that challenge civil inattention in urban spaces.

In particular, spatial proximity has significant affectivity on Chinese college students when they negotiate encounters with strangers on WeChat. This also refers to these young people's everyday life experiences in the late modern urban cities in China. Often growing up in only-child families, post-90s Chinese young people are close to their parents and former schoolmates. However, moving away from home for the first time to study in a strange city, these young people are keen to develop friendships and romantic relationships in their new environment in order to cope with their loneliness and homesickness. The development of friendships or romantic relationships can possibly be achieved by activating latent ties with strangers (Haythornthwaite, 2002, 2005). However, there was historically a rise of *civil inattention* in contemporary urban spaces which discouraged interactions between strangers who share spatial proximity (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012; Goffman, 1963). Mobile-based social networking applications, such as WeChat, therefore, serve as interfaces that empower Chinese college students to navigate their encounters with strangers in urban spaces, so as to develop personal circles in a new environment without their parents and old friends' company.

Through acknowledgement of how Chinese young people use mobile-based social networking applications to challenge civil inattention in urban spaces, this chapter also challenges the exaggeration of digital communication technologies as a tool to overcome the distance. This resonates with what I have argued in the previous chapters: our interactions on mobile-based social networking applications involve a particular spatial experience. When young people use this kind of applications, they are not engaging with a homogenised virtual social space, because they cannot withdraw their presence from the space where their bodies are situated. Under these circumstances, these young people's bodily encounters with surroundings generate affects, thereby influencing how they communicate on mobile-based social networking applications as well. The ways in which sharing spatial proximity generates social propinquity between strangers capture this spatial logic when Chinese college students negotiate encounters with strangers on WeChat in urban spaces. This suggests that our everyday practices of any kind are always spatial, and that this spatiality cannot be overlooked if we want to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the digital social norms emerging with young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications.

# Chapter 7. Spatial Collateral Surveillance:

## How Urban Chinese Young People Contextually Preserve Spatial Privacy on WeChat

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter argues that concerns over personal privacy have a significant impact on urban Chinese youths' everyday use of mobile social media. This impact frames important aspects of the digital social norms to which they adhere on WeChat. Privacy, by definition, refers to 'a state in which one is not observed or disturbed by other people' (Stevenson, 2010, p. 1,413). Preserving privacy often refers to protecting personal information and preventing it from being accessed by others (S. B. Barnes, 2006). In parts of rural China, privacy is still an unknown concept owing to the collectivistic tradition of the East Asian country (Miller et al., 2016, pp. 188–189). However, urban Chinese people, especially the post-90s generation, have been embracing Western individualistic culture since the reform of China (Liu, 2011). With the rise of individualism, urban Chinese young people are increasingly aware of the importance of personal privacy. Nevertheless, protection of privacy has been contested in urban cities across the globe, because the use of (mobile-based) social networking applications requires and encourages users to share rather than hide personal information (boyd, 2014; Miller et al., 2016; van Dijck, 2013). This leads to the rise of collateral surveillance – a form of surveillance in which users' personal lives are inevitably monitored by each other because they have access to each other's personal information through the content they generate on these applications (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 125–127). The more content users share, the more their personal privacy is revealed to other people via collateral surveillance on social networking applications.

Young people are active users of (mobile-based) social networking applications who lead the trend of use (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 702; T. T. C. Lin & Li, 2014, p. 2). Most of them are certainly enthusiastic about sharing personal information on (mobile-based) social networking applications in order to present their identities, keep in touch with friends, and develop new connections with those who were previously unknown to them[29]. As boyd (2014, p. 56) notes, sharing personal information is a

[29] For details please see the previous chapters.

way in which young people assert their authority over their personal lives. This, however, does not mean that young people have no awareness of privacy (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 113; Leszczynski, 2015, p. 965; West et al., 2009, pp. 622–624). Acquisti and Ralph (2006), boyd and Ellison (2007), Chambers (2013), and van Dijck (2013) have already found evidence of how privacy concerns influence the digital social norms to which young people adhere on social networking applications. For instance, Acquisti and Ralph's (2006) survey of 506 US college students who use Facebook discovered that more than one-third were 'very worried' that complete strangers might identify their sexual orientation, political views, or the name of their current partner through their Facebook Timeline (Acquisti & Ralph, 2006, p. 44). Similarly, Hjorth and Gu (2012, p. 709) conducted surveys, as well as follow-up observations and interviews of ten urban Chinese young people who use Jiepang[30]. Their research found that there are Chinese young people who avoid uploading 'selfies' on the applications because of their concerns about personal privacy. Across the globe, young people are constantly developing social techniques to preserve privacy on social networking applications. These techniques comprise a significant dimension of their everyday use of social networking applications, becoming an important dimension of the digital social norms to which they adhere.

With a particular focus on urban Chinese young people's digital social norms on social networking applications accessed via mobile phones, the issue of privacy protection now involves a spatial dimension (Leszczynski, 2015, p. 965). In this chapter, I use the concept of spatial privacy to highlight the issues of personal information relating to young people's everyday engagement with urban spaces. Spatial privacy is becoming an increasing concern for today's young people because the design of mobile-based social networking applications encourages users to share locative information. As mentioned in the previous chapters, most of the mobile-based social networking applications, including Brightkite (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011), Dodgeball (Humphreys, 2007), Facebook Place (Lambert, 2013), Loopt (Lindqvist et al., 2011), LooptMix (T. Morgan, 2009), as well as WeChat, incorporate location-based services. The location-based services, based on Global Positioning System (GPS), allow urban young people to display their locative

[30] Jiepang, similar to Foursquare, is a Chinese mobile-based social networking application which allows users to check in at locations and share photographs.

information for self-presentation[31] and social networking[32]. However, this information also discloses their whereabouts in urban cities. This information may have an impact on spatial privacy, a concept these young people may have to address in their everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 118–121; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015, p. 1,657).

In this chapter, I argue that a new mode of surveillance – spatial collateral surveillance – has emerged on mobile-based social networking applications. Resonating with Jensen (2007), Jurgenson (2013), and Kelsey's (2015) 'omniopticon' (or 'omnopticon'), spatial collateral surveillance describes the rise of 'the many watching the many' in the present digital age. However, this concept emphasises the spatial dimension of surveillance taking placing on mobile-based social networking applications, meaning that users may monitor each other's mobility in and engagement with urban spaces through accessing the locative information they share (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 125–127). In particular, urban Chinese young people are active users who often share locative information on these applications. These young people are westernised, appreciating individualism and often embracing a similar understanding of privacy as that of their peers in the West[33] (Liu, 2011). Their fear of revealing spatial privacy to those unwanted others, however, may cause anxiety, requiring them to develop new social techniques to cope with spatial collateral surveillance (Leszczynski, 2015, p. 965). This ultimately becomes an important dimension of the ways in which these young people socialise on mobile-based social networking applications. Chinese college students are of typical of the younger generation who are leading the trend of WeChat usage in urban China (Mao, 2014, p. 639). Through the present netnographic enquiry, I found that the thorny issues lying at the very heart of these young people's spatial privacy preservation are related to the complexity of managing a personal boundary that determines who has or does not have access to their locative information. In particular, these students often connect with their parents on WeChat. Tension arises between the students and their parents when the latter try to monitor the former's everyday lives for parenting purposes. This has a significant influence on how these young people use WeChat in urban spaces, mediating the digital social

[31] For details please see Chapter 4 – Self-Presentation and Personalisation of Space.
[32] For details please see Chapter 6 – Spatial Proximity and Encounters among Strangers.
[33] For details please see Chapter 2 – Digital Social Norms and Everyday Practices.

norms to which they adhere with regard to their parents' spatial collateral surveillance.

In order to articulate the above issues, the chapter begins by analysing how young people's understanding of privacy is affected by use of mobile-based social networking applications. Drawing upon the empirical evidence from my netnographic enquiry, I demonstrate how Chinese college students' concerns over privacy on WeChat are associated with and have a direct impact on their mobility in urban spaces. These findings echo the most important argument of this thesis, demonstrating that the digital social norms to which young people adhere on mobile-based social networking applications have to be understood in relation to their everyday engagement with and experiences of urban spaces. The salient points of addressed in this chapter are as follows:

(1) How privacy becomes spatially articulated on mobile-based social networking applications, following the rise of spatial collateral surveillance.

(2) How and why Chinese college students develop digital social norms to cope with strangers and parents' spatial collateral surveillance respectively, subject to the particularity of their encounters with parents on the mobile-based social networking application.

(3) How spatial collateral surveillance on WeChat influences Chinese college students' experience of and engagement with urban spaces in their everyday lives.

### 7.2 Spatial Collateral Surveillance

With a focus on Chinese young people's concerns over privacy on mobile-based social networking applications, the mediation of digital social norms has to be understood with an acknowledgement of the changing mode of surveillance taking place on the applications. This is because how young people behave is also significantly influenced by the surveillance enhanced by the applications. Following Foucault (1977), 'panopticon' is used as a metaphor to describe governmental surveillance, explaining how authorities govern society (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 121). This type of surveillance is characterised by a top-down mode in

which the authorities hold the supreme power to monitor individual social members and then regulate their behaviours (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). For example, an authoritarian regime may use Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras to trace what people do every day. Failures to obey government policy may be identified immediately, because of the ubiquity of these cameras. Under these circumstances, people have no control of their privacy since they cannot hide their personal information under this type of surveillance (Solove, 2007, p. 748).

Nowadays, governmental top-down surveillance has extended to young people's use of (mobile-based) social networking applications. First and foremost, young people are required to provide a certain amount of personal information when signing up for a personal account on social networking applications (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Furthermore, the design of the applications also tempts these young people to share original content, so as to socialise with other users (boyd, 2014; Cote & Pybus, 2007; Dean, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). This original content reveals their personal information as well. While the use of social networking applications always involves disclosure of personal information, governmental top-down surveillance is facilitated, allowing authorities to monitor young people who are often active users of the applications. In the US, teenagers have been charged with 'under-age drinking' or 'misbehaviour', because school officials found clues on their Facebook accounts (S. B. Barnes, 2006, p. n.p.). In particular, in authoritarian regimes, this also enables authorities to gather intelligence about dissidents (Rod & Weidmann, 2015, p. 338; Svensson, 2016, pp. 3–4). The Chinese government has arrested a number of young opposition activists, such as Huohuo Qin, for posting materials that were 'deemed libellous' on Weibo (The BBC, 2014, p. n.p.). This governmental top-down surveillance raises Chinese young people's privacy concerns when they use social networking applications, neatly demonstrating why they often separate 'characters with hyphens and commas', use 'English acronyms or wholesale Romanisation', or use 'Chinese characters with similar pronunciations' to the words forbidden by the government, when they discuss sensitive political issues on the internet[34] (Liu, 2011, p. 40).

On social networking applications, the top-down mode of surveillance also includes a commercial dimension. Commercial top-down surveillance allows internet giants to

[34] This certainly reflects the Chinese government's technological censorship on the internet as well (Liu, 2011, p. 40).

collect users' personal information through analysing the content they share on social networking applications. The internet giants, thereby, are able to provide users with 'contextually relevant' (e.g. according to audience's gender, age, and consumption preference revealed) advertisings for tangible profit (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 123). In the West, Google and Facebook have proven to be successful examples that exemplify the profitability of commercial top-down surveillance over young people who use social networking applications frequently (Cote, 2014, p. 135; de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 123). While remaining an authoritarian regime, the marketisation of the internet in China grants native internet giants with monopoly status. For instance, Tencent, the Chinese internet giant which launched WeChat, claims to value WeChat users' privacy, but the Internet giant also utilises young people's personal information for business and requests them to agree to this privacy policy before signing up for a WeChat account. Tencent clearly states that the company may circulate customised advertising to users, according to the personal information they provide (Tencent, 2014b, p. n.p.). This neatly explains how the Chinese internet giant raised ¥3,308 million (approximately £331 million) from mobile advertising in 2014 alone (Tencent, 2014a, p. 5).

This commercial top-down surveillance, alongside the governmental one, causes a 'privacy paradox' (S. B. Barnes, 2006, p. n.p.). In other words, while young people are required and encouraged to constantly share their 'intimate thoughts and behaviours' to achieve sociality on social networking applications, they have to accept the consequences of allowing governments and businesses to collect their personal data. The privacy paradox raises public concerns, urging parents and schools to educate young people how to preserve their privacy on social networking applications (S. B. Barnes, 2006; Boyd & Jenkins, 2006). Nevertheless, young people are learning how to use social networking applications 'by interacting with their friends', rather than 'learning these behaviours from parents and teachers' (S. B. Barnes, 2006, p. n.p.). While interacting with friends, these young people often find that issues of collateral surveillance are often more prominent with their everyday use of the applications than top-down surveillance (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 125).

Use of (mobile-based) social networking applications comprises collateral surveillance, a mode of surveillance in which the many watch the many (de Souza e

Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 123–127). This surveillance is encouraged by the design of social networking applications, allowing users to browse the original content that their friends generate and circulate (boyd, 2014; Sas et al., 2009; Tufekci, 2007; van Dijck, 2013). For example, as soon as Western young people log in to their Facebook accounts, the News Feed – the default homepage of Facebook – will automatically appear on the screen, displaying the recent activities of friends as stream-based content (Lambert, 2013, p. 96). These young people's access to a personal account on Facebook, therefore, becomes routine surveillance over their friends' everyday lives, whether they are aware of it or not. Like Facebook Timeline, WeChat's Moments updates archive the personal life episodes that Chinese young people share on WeChat. When these young people browse their friends' Moments updates, they are contributing to the collateral surveillance of their friends as well. In particular, young people are often curious about what their friend's lives are like (Al Omoush et al., 2012, p. 2,390). Browsing the content that their friends circulate stimulates these young people's curiosity, making them unable to stop engaging in collateral surveillance practices on (mobile-based) social networking applications. However, while using (mobile-based) social networking applications to monitor others, young people have to accept that they are simultaneously being monitored by others as well (boyd, 2011; Lambert, 2013). Constantly monitoring and being monitored by others generate concerns over privacy, consequently influencing how young people behave on these applications.

Similar to collateral surveillance, Jensen (2007), Jurgenson (2013), and Kelsey (2015) uses the concept of 'omniopticon' (or 'omnopticon') to articulate how users' everyday use of (mobile-based) social networking applications are influenced by 'the many watching the many' facilitated by these applications (Kelsey, 2015, p. 2; Kelsey & Bennett, 2014, p. 38). This approach pays primary attention to the changing power relationship between individual users and its impacts on the macro social structure (Kelsey & Bennett, 2014, p. 39). On Twitter, for instance, the 'report abuse' button allows one to report abusive or menacing Tweets generated by other users (Cookson, 2013, p. n.p.). Under these circumstances, Twitter users have to be cautious during the composition of their Tweets. This phenomenon is a reflection of the changing power relationship between individual within an omniopticon. It uncovers that the potential gaze of others may increase self-regulation in people's everyday use of (mobile-based) social networking applications (Kelsey & Bennett,

2014, p. 39). This frames the socio-political lives of What Castells (Castells, 2000, 2007) terms the ‘networked society’ – the current society in which individuals are increasingly connected with each other via digital communication technologies. In the authoritarian Chinese context, the potential gaze of other users often causes Chinese users’ self-censorship of the content that relates to the criticism of the government (Peng, 2017, p. 12).

With a specific focus on the private realm, collateral surveillance pays primary attention to the impacts of users’ concerns over their personal privacy on of their everyday use of (mobile-based) social networking applications (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 123–127). Madden and Smith (2010) conducted a large-scale survey with 2,253 US participants on their everyday use of digital communication technologies on the internet. The findings indicate that more than half of adult American internet users have used a search engine to check other people’s personal information (M. Madden & Smith, 2010). Ironically, approximately half of them also said they are annoyed by those people who consider it is normal to search for others’ personal information on the internet (Lambert, 2013; M. Madden & Smith, 2010). Concerns over privacy require young people to preserve their personal information from stalkers on the internet. The findings by Madden and Smith (2010, p. 1) show that those American young adults who are familiar with the functionality of social networking applications are concerned about what their ‘footprints’ reveal about them through these technologies. More than 70 per cent of social networking application users aging from 18 to 29 said that they ‘have changed the privacy settings on their profile to limit what they share with others’ (M. Madden & Smith, 2010, p. 1). China has certainly had a long collective tradition which defines privacy as a synonym of ‘bad secret’ (Miller et al., 2016, pp. 188–189). This negative understanding of privacy is somehow still applicable in rural China (Miller et al., 2016, pp. 188–189). However, urban Chinese young people have been embracing the Westernised lifestyle of nuclear families since they were born (Maguire & Hu, 2013, p. 670). Compared to those who live in rural areas, these urban young people often appreciate Western individualistic ideology and, therefore, value their privacy almost as much as their Western peers do (Liu, 2011). They are developing digital social norms that define appropriate ways of privacy preservation in their everyday use of social networking applications.

On mobile-based social networking applications, both Chinese and Western young people, however, encounter issues of a new set of privacy – spatial privacy because the applications facilitate spatial collateral surveillance (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 141). Spatial surveillance refers to the surveillance of one's everyday engagement with and experience of spaces through tracking his or her locative information. Before the advent of mobile-based social networking applications, spatial surveillance often referred to a direct coordination, the surveillance being practised through direct communication between the person monitoring and the person being monitored. Representative examples of direct coordination include how one uses phone calls or text messages to find out another one's whereabouts (Richard Ling & Yttri, 2002, p. 143).

Ito and Okabe's (2005b) ethnographic study of 24 Japanese high school and college students shows that Japanese young people often make phone calls or send short messages to notify friends where they are and how far they are from scheduled meeting sites, when they fail to arrive on time owing to traffic congestions (M. Ito & Okabe, 2005b, p. 19). Similarly, US parents may monitor their children's spatial movements after school by calling them several times a day (Palen & Hughes, 2007, p. 344). In the above examples of direct coordination, spatial surveillance is practised through verbal conversation or textual communications. The person being monitored cannot engage in the surveillance unless they stop what they are doing to answer the phone or reply to the message. On the one hand, direct coordination might appear to be disruptive to the activities to which the person being monitored is simultaneously attending (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 141). On the other hand, this form of coordination also empowers the person being monitored, since they have the ability to decide whether to answer the phone, whether to reply to the message, and even whether to be honest with the monitor.

Unlike direct coordination, collateral coordination refers to the surveillance among people who track each other's locative information without requesting consent. Spatial collateral surveillance emerges with the advent of mobile-based social networking applications which incorporate location-based services that display users' locative information through tracking GPS signals from their mobile phones. The locative information reveals users' everyday engagement with and experience of urban spaces, enabling them to identify each other's engagement with and

experience of urban spaces. Brightkite (Gordon & de Souza e Silva, 2011), Dodgeball (Humphreys, 2007), Facebook Place (Lambert, 2013), Loopt (Lindqvist et al., 2011), LooptMix (T. Morgan, 2009), as well as WeChat – there is a long list of mobile-based social networking applications with locative awareness. Using these mobile-based social networking applications, most users agree to publicise their locative information, since the broadcast of this information is one of the primary utilities for which these applications are designed (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 147). For example, WeChat records and publicises Chinese young people's locative information through location check-ins and location-based stranger social plug-ins. As soon as these young people check in at a location (see Figure 17) or click on 'People Nearby' (see Figure 18), their locative information is automatically shared with other users. This enables these young people to interact with other users by navigating locative information (e.g. presenting self-identity via displaying their whereabouts in Moments or making friends with close-by strangers via 'People Nearby'). However, other users' access to these young people's locative information does not require a permit. Spatial surveillance, thereby, becomes collaterally practised, when these young people use the above location-based services. This collateral mode of spatial surveillance certainly appears to be less disruptive, but it provides these young people with little control over their spatial privacy, since they may be constantly watched by someone without being aware of it (Boesen, Rode, & Mancini, 2010, p. 69; de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 126–127).

Figure 17. Users' Locative Information Revealed in WeChat Moments

N.B. the Location Check-Ins are Underlined

Figure 18. Users' Locative Information Revealed after She Clicked on 'People Nearby'

Chinese college students are representative of Chinese young people in general who live in urban cities. Spatial collateral surveillance raises their concerns over spatial privacy, because mobile-based social networking applications, through which this mode of surveillance is practised, are installed on their mobile devices. These young people carry their mobile devices with them while they are moving around in urban cities and attending to different activities (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2010, 2012; Evans, 2015; Humphreys, 2007). Their use of the applications, therefore, involves a highly complex, dynamic, and interactive relation with their locality and mobility in urban spaces (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012; Hjorth & Gu, 2012). In particular, WeChat is the mobile-based social networking application which almost all Chinese college students use every day (Mao, 2014). As stated in previous chapters, because of their leaving home for the first to study in a university located in a strange city, these students use the application to communicate with a number of different people who share different social relations with them. These include old friends, casual friends, acquaintances, parents, and even strangers. When Chinese college students publicise their locative information on WeChat for self-presentation[35] or social networking[36], they have to run the risk of leaking spatial privacy to those with whom they do not wish to share such information. The risks require these Chinese young people to manage the revealing and concealing of it according to different scenarios (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012; Leszczynski, 2015), framing an important dimension of the digital social norms particular to their everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications.

First and foremost, the risks of leaking spatial privacy are associated with being stalked by strangers. While using ‘People Nearby’ to make friends, Chinese young people are possibly exposing their locative information to hundreds and thousands of close-by strangers’ scrutiny. For these young people, this may lead to the dangers of being approached by criminals, causing personal safety issues. Stalking is of particular concern to Chinese young women when they use WeChat. Their anxieties about stalking are shaped by the gendered Chinese culture in which they are defined as vulnerable beings: Departing from the concept of ‘neutered females’ advocated in the communist revolution (Schaffer & Song, 2007, p. 19), today’s Chinese women have accepted Western consumerism, which encourages them to purchase beauty

[35] For details please see Chapter 5 – Self-Presentation and Personalisation of Space
[36] For details please see Chapter 6 – Spatial Proximity and Encounters among Strangers.

products, satisfy their material desires, and return to domestic space for an easy life (L. Wang, 2004, p. 20). This paves the way for a return of the patriarchal tradition in China, making Chinese women become subordinate to men once again. This consumerist-defined femininity reinforces Chinese young women's impression of themselves as vulnerable beings, making them pay greater attention to the risks of being raped or abused by strangers who stalk them on mobile-based social networking applications.

In the present netnographic enquiry, male Chinese college students expressed fewer worries about unknown stalkers. These young men, however, noted that they are also concerned about spatial collateral surveillance on WeChat because this provides their parents with a way to monitor their movements in urban spaces. The concerns over parents' spatial surveillance are shared among both male and female young people. The present netnographic enquiry discovered that parents are often included in Chinese college students' contact list on WeChat. Tension arises from the dynamics between Chinese college students and their parents when the parents try to monitor the young people's whereabouts on WeChat with the objective of carrying out their parenting roles. Parenting involves a power relationship. Power, following a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault, 1977, 1980), is not a static entity that a specific person or institution holds, but a relational concept that emerges when the person or institution is interacting with us. Chinese college students add their parents on WeChat in order to keep in touch them after moving away from home (Mao, 2014, p. 139). For the parents, however, this enables them to exercise their power over their offspring by carrying out their parent duties at a distance.

Chinese traditional culture advocates filial piety, requiring children to be obedient their parents (Hamilton, 1990, p. 77; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003, p. 209). Paradoxically, as stated in the previous chapters, today's urban Chinese young people embrace the Western individualistic culture and are often keen to be independent (Liu, 2011). As Livingstone (2008), Madianou and Miller (Madianou & Miller, 2012) note, living in an increasingly individualised contemporary society, young people's self-awareness and traditional parenting can come into conflict. While parents wish supervise their children's use of social networking applications, young people are keen to resist this aspect of parenting, in order to claim authority over their personal realm (Livingstone, 2008; Madianou & Miller, 2012).

Individualised young people's resistance to parenting is evident amongst Chinese college students' practices on WeChat, and reflected by the social techniques that they develop to protect their spatial privacy from their parents' scrutiny. Particular digital social norms are engendered in their everyday use of the mobile-based social networking application. The following sections, therefore, articulate the mediation of digital social norms in relation to Chinese young people's preservation of spatial privacy on mobile-based social networking applications; this is done by drawing upon the empirical findings from the present netnographic enquiry with Chinese college students.

### 7.3 Defining a Personal Boundary to Protect Spatial Privacy

When developing digital social norms to address spatial collateral surveillance, the difficulty that lies at the very heart of spatial privacy protection is the management of a personal boundary which categorises who has access to our spatial privacy and who has not (Livingstone, 2008, p. 406; Miller et al., 2016, pp. 78–81; Tufekci, 2007, p. 20). One approach that Chinese young people may develop involves defining a personal boundary that excludes strangers. Strangers are those who were previously unknown to us and, therefore, share no pre-existing trust with us (Chambers, 2013, p. 100). Stalking, therefore, is often used to describe strangers' collateral spatial surveillance, and is something that young people must be wary of in their everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications. Lindqvist, Cranshaw, Wiese, Hong, and Zimmerman's (2011) conducted interviews and qualitative surveys with 18 young people who use Foursquare[37]. Their research discovered that almost half of the participants reported that they were reluctant to share locations: most of their worries were expressed as a fear of being tracked by strangers with suspicious motives (Lindqvist et al., 2011, p. 2,409). Even those who were comfortable with sharing locative information were also concerned about spatial privacy (Lindqvist et al., 2011, p. 2,409). However, these young people were confident that they had the capacity to use the 'existing privacy controls' provided by Foursquare to manage 'what was shared with others' (Lindqvist et al., 2011, p. 2409). For instance, they could disconnect their Foursquare account from other social networking profiles,

[37] Foursquare is a location-based service that allows users to share experiences with particular locations, such as restaurants, pubs, and nightclubs. Users may also use Foursquare to share locative information on other social networking applications, such as Facebook (Olanoff, 2012).

avoid checking in at their home address, and only add people who were known to them as friends on Foursquare (Lindqvist et al., 2011, p. 2,409).

Similar to the above findings by Lindqvist et al. (2011), I discovered that Chinese young people may preserve their spatial privacy through managing a personal boundary for friends and another one for strangers. While friends are allowed to access their locations, strangers are often excluded from their personal boundaries of spatial privacy. This is often done by changing how they use stranger social plug-ins on WeChat. Interestingly, this method is more likely to be employed by female Chinese college students. Participant Zhang, for instance, is a 23-year-old Year 4 female Chinese college student who described herself as an 'inactive user' of 'People Nearby' plug-in. Zhang might use the plug-in to find about persons previously not known to her but living geographically nearby. This practice, however, only serves as a way to pass the time. Zhang almost always deletes her locative traces after using 'People Nearby' in order to prevent close-by strangers from discovering her WeChat profile[38] (see Figure 19). Zhang said that she never adds strangers as friends on WeChat and is highly unlikely to accept their friend requests if they found her through 'People Nearby'.

[38] The privacy setting of WeChat allows users to delete their locative information left in 'People Near'. This prevents them from being found by close-by strangers as soon as they log out.


Figure 19. How to Clean One's Locative Traces in 'People Nearby'

N.B. The Yellow Circle Highlights 'Clean Location' Button

The ways in which Zhang preserves her spatial privacy amid strangers' spatial collateral surveillance are typical of the female participants in the present netnographic enquiry, neatly demonstrating that Chinese young women often pay greater attention to personal safety than their peers of the opposite sex. Female Chinese college students are concerned that revealing their spatial privacy to strangers may allow wrongdoers or even criminals to stalk their whereabouts in urban spaces, putting them in danger of violent crimes. As participant Zhang noted when I brought up the subject in the interview with her:

> I think it is risky to let the strangers you come across on WeChat know where you live or where you often go to… You could never know who exactly they are and whether they are a good person. It is very dangerous if they could follow you (through the locative traces you left) on WeChat and then find you in 'real' life… You never know what they are plotting.
>
> Zhang

The quotes from Zhang are not an isolated example. Similar anxieties about strangers' stalking are often expressed by female Chinese college students but

rarely mentioned by their male peers in the present netnographic enquiry. This interesting gender difference reflects the organisation of gendered Chinese society. It is undeniable that women are often physically weaker than men. Statistics show that women are often the victim of violent crimes, especially abduction or rape, in China (Edlund, Li, Yi, & Zhang, 2013, p. 22). However, the impression of women as vulnerable to criminal offences is strengthened by popular Chinese culture, including the press, TV, movies, or even urban legends. In particular, urban legends are stories with an element of horror or fear, often serving as cautionary tales. They are rooted in local popular culture, which often reflects a general tendency in the society (Zacher, 2010). Participant Zeng, a 20-year-old Year 3 female student, admitted that the reason why she is extremely concerned about her spatial privacy on WeChat is because of an urban legend which she heard.

The urban legend describes how a young lady was kidnapped by gangsters and sold into prostitution because she often used ‘People Nearby’ on WeChat. The stranger social plug-in revealed her spatial traces, which enabled the gangsters to locate where she lived despite the fact that they have never crossed paths before. According to the urban legend, although there were witnesses at the crime scene, they failed to rescue the victim, because one of the kidnappers accurately described her home address, alongside many other personal details. This convinced the witnesses that the lady was the gangster’s wife and they were just having a family argument. This urban legend strongly imposed a notion that young women, have to avoid using location-based stranger social plug-ins, such as ‘People Nearby’, on WeChat. Their spatial privacy has to be safely protected, so as to prevent unexpected safety troubles. It is worthwhile mentioning that Zeng was born in a small town not very far away from the university which she attends. However, Zeng can only see her parents twice a year during summer and winter vacations, because Zeng’s parents work in a city far away from her hometown. Thus, Zeng has to live alone in a strange city without her parents’ company and protection during term time, and also travel alone to visit her parents twice a year at the start of the holidays. The continuous experiences of living and travelling alone often cause Zeng’s anxiety about her personal safety. She is, thus, easily convinced by the urban legend, although she has never heard of the story from TV news, newspapers, or other reliable media sources.

China is traditionally a patriarchal society dominated by men (Rai, 1995, p. 181; Xie, 2013, p. 3). Despite the rise of gender equality since the communist revolution, today's popular discourse still constructs a vulnerable impression of women. Everyday life experiences remind Chinese women that they are less powerful than their peers of the opposite sex (Xie, 2013, pp. 4–5). Thus, female Chinese college students often have fairly limited confidence in handling the negative consequences of strangers' collateral surveillance. By minimising the disclosure of spatial privacy, these young women attempt to prevent themselves from being harmed by strangers who may stalk their spatial tracks on WeChat with suspicious motives. They are, thereby, able to achieve a feeling of safety by having high levels of control over their spatial privacy. As uncovered in Hjorth and Gu's (2012, p. 709) research, concerns over stalking on mobile-based social networking applications are much more likely to be raised by young women in China. These gendered concerns over strangers' spatial collateral surveillance, however, are not particular to Chinese young women but also shared among their peers in other countries that share similarly imbalanced power relationships between men and women. For instance, Licoppe and Inda (2009, pp. 107–108) conducted an ethnographic enquiry with Japanese young people who use Mogi[39]. Their research uncovered a case in which a Japanese young woman was stalked by an unknown male user on Mogi when she was at home alone, causing her extreme anxiety about her personal safety (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 146). She had to message two close-by male friends who also use Mogi to help her with the situation (Licoppe & Inada, 2009, pp. 107–111).

Defining strangers as completely unwanted others who have no right to access our spatial privacy, however, is highly contestable in the digital social norms to which male Chinese college students adhere on mobile-based social networking applications. Chinese masculine tradition encourages young men to be outgoing, strong and adventurous (Louie, 2002, pp. 4–5). Male Chinese college students are, therefore, often brave enough and have the capacity to protect themselves from strangers' gaze. Furthermore, as the previous chapter found, spatial collateral surveillance among strangers also comprises opportunities, possibly facilitating the development of friendship or romance between those who share spatial proximity but

[39] Mogi is a Japanese location-based mobile gaming application which also provides social networking services between game players (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 147).

who were previously unknown to each other[40]. By concentrating on these positive opportunities, male Chinese college students are more likely to enjoy monitoring/being monitored by strangers and pay less attention to the negative implications of spatial collateral surveillance. For instance, participant Zu, a Year 2 male Chinese college student, chooses to be an 'active' user of location-based stranger social plug-ins on WeChat. The 19-year-old never deletes his locative tracks after using 'People Nearby' and believes that strangers are 'incapable' of hurting him despite obtaining information about his whereabouts in urban spaces. He has heard of an urban legend as similar to that mentioned by Zeng, but is confident that the same problem would not occur to him. As Zu explained,

> I do not think any strangers (with suspicious motives) might be interested in following me… This story (about people been kidnapped by criminals after revealing personal spatial privacy on WeChat) could only happen to women, but it is nonsense for men like me – we are much stronger. We are capable of protecting ourselves and bad guys know that too.
>
> Zu

In fact, female Chinese college students are starting to challenge the inappropriateness of sharing their spatial information with strangers as well. The present netnographic enquiry discovered that six out of the eleven female Chinese college student participants are generally comfortable with revealing locative information on WeChat stranger social plug-ins. These female Chinese college students, like their male counterparts, consider that 'the benefits (of spatial collateral surveillance) outweigh the negative consequences' as well (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 114). Revealing spatial tracks to strangers allows these young women to be found by their male peers on WeChat, framing a way in which romance and friendship may be developed on Chinese university campuses. In their romantic encounters on WeChat, these young women are seemingly passive compared to their peers of the opposite sex. They do not initiate interactions with male strangers unless the strangers message them. However, they have to be as brave as their male peers when facing strangers' collateral surveillance. These brave young women, alongside many of their male peers, comprise the increasingly adventurous urban Chinese young people who are actively exploring the benefits of strangers'

[40] For details please see Chapter 6 – Spatial Proximity and Encounters among Strangers.

spatial collateral surveillance. This resonates with boyd's (2014) study of privacy in general, showing that mobile-based social networking applications encourage a sharing culture in which young people are willing to accept being monitored by other users, whether these users are previously known or unknown to them.

While they may reap the benefit from spatial collateral surveillance, this by no means suggests that female Chinese college students with adventurous personalities have no awareness of spatial privacy protection at all. On the contrary, these young women do understand how to preserve spatial privacy through the existing privacy settings provided on WeChat. For instance, participant Chen is a third-year female college student. The 21-year-old noted that she is not particularly worried about revealing locative information in 'People Nearby' because the plug-in only shows the relative geographic distance between users. Without further details, strangers cannot identify who she is, what she looks like, and, in particular, where she lives or what places she frequents. The detailed spatial privacy of her everyday life, however, is shared in her Moments updates – consisting of photographs and location check-ins that archive her everyday activities. In order to prevent this 'important' spatial privacy, Chen deactivates 'Public Moments'[41] on WeChat (see Figure 20). This blocks strangers' access to her Moments updates, even when they find her WeChat profile through the locative tracks she left in 'People Nearby'. Chen's practice is not unique but shared among my participants (especially female students) who often use location-based stranger social plug-ins. This comprises one of the critical techniques that many Chinese college students employ to address spatial privacy protection when they expose themselves to strangers' collateral surveillance on WeChat.

[41] 'Public Moments' is a part of privacy setting on WeChat. When 'Public Moments' is activated, strangers are able to access a user's Moments updates as soon as they find him or her. When 'Public Moments' is deactivated, no one has access to a user's Moments updates unless they are friends on WeChat. There is a button to control the activation/deactivation of 'Public Moments', as shown in Figure 20.


Figure 20. Chen's 'Public Moments' is Deactivated

N.B. The Yellow Circle Highlights the Button Which Allows Chen to Block Strangers' Access to Her Moments Updates

Nevertheless, spatial privacy is not only connected with strangers' spatial collateral surveillance. Unwanted others are not fixed but contextually defined, reflecting the changing nature of young people's willingness to share personal information under different circumstances (Chambers, 2013, p. 74; Miller et al., 2016, pp. 188–189). For instance, through observations of a large number of North American Grindr users' profiles, Birnholtz et al. (2014, p. 10) discovered that there are many male young people who choose not to share identifying personal information for the purpose of protecting their spatial privacy. However, their privacy concerns are primarily associated with friends and acquaintances rather than strangers (Birnholtz et al., 2014, p. 10). This is because Grindr is primarily used by gay men to arrange sexual encounters. Grindr users fear that their practices might be misinterpreted as 'potentially stigmatised behaviour', such as 'casual sex or hooking up', by their friends and acquaintances who identify them on the application (Birnholtz et al., 2014, p. 11). This fear, paradoxically, transforms friends and acquaintances into unwanted others, despite the fact that they may share a higher level of trust and intimacy with the Grindr users 'in real life'.

Compared to the American young men who use Grindr, Chinese young people's management of personal boundaries on WeChat is even more contextual, given the complexity of the connections they form on the mobile-based social networking application. In the early development of mobile-based social networking applications, the contextual nature was not so apparent, because these applications were only used by small numbers of early adopters and these users kept only a limited amount of friends there (Humphreys, 2007, p. 357). However, mobile-based social networking applications have increasingly become mainstream technologies amongst younger users across the globe (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 137; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015, p. 1,643). Nowadays, Chinese college students usually have hundreds of contacts on WeChat, which forge complex personal circles comprising not only these young people's friends and acquaintances, but also their relatives and parents – including those who may carry dramatically different characteristics, but who gain sufficient trust from and share much intimacy with these young people in their everyday lives. The complexity of young people's connections on WeChat leads to a difficulty in managing a personalised and contextualised boundary to determine who has the access to their spatial privacy. The present netnographic enquiry identifies that the tension of power relationships comprises a notable issue that Chinese college students have to address in order to protect their spatial privacy under the spatial collateral surveillance by those who are familiar with them.

### 7.4 Continuous Management of Personal Boundary

Rather than being a one-off process, digital social norms encourage Chinese young people to continuously manage personal boundaries in their everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications. This management is contextual and sensitive to the ways in which they interact with their contacts on the applications. In particular, mass self-communication comprises an important dimension of the interactions taking place on mobile-based social networking applications. This mode of communication requires young people to simultaneously cope with many different contacts carrying different characteristics and sharing different levels of intimacy and trust with them. As I have addressed in Chapter 2, mass self-communication describes the mode of interactions among many participants in decentralised networks (Castells, 2007, 2008, 2009). Interactions on mobile-based social networking applications have 'self' characters, as each participant has a level of

control over what information is generated. In the meantime, these interactions also have ‘mass’ characters, as the content is not ‘sent’ to one specific individual, but simultaneously ‘shared’ with many. Scholars, such as boyd (2007, pp. 124–126), have therefore used the term ‘networked public’ to explain the features of social encounters through social networking applications, highlighting the open access of self-generated content on social networking applications.

However, *semi-public*, rather than public, is a more suitable term to describe those about whom Chinese college students are concerned in their continuous management of personal boundaries on WeChat. Semi-public never denies the public characteristics of the contacts with whom these young people interact on WeChat. However, semi-public also emphasises that those who are included in Chinese college students’ WeChat contact lists have already developed some level of trust and intimacy with these young people. Unlike video bloggers on YouTube, ‘the more the better’ is most probably not applicable, when Chinese college students consider the number of contacts that they would like to have on WeChat. Chinese college students have already been selective in building connections and blocked out many of the stalkers from their contact lists. Nevertheless, the chosen contacts comprise not only parents and schoolmates but also casual friends and acquaintances. The different levels of trust and intimacy they share with Chinese college students complicate these young people’s personal boundary management on WeChat. Among the various types of contacts, I found that parents concern Chinese college students most, owing to the tension of power relationships in spatial collateral surveillance.

Tension arises from the dynamics between parents and offspring, particularly when the parents access the young people’s locative information in WeChat Moments, with the intention of regulating their offspring’s engagement with certain spaces in urban cities. On mobile-based social networking applications, when others monitor our locality and mobility in urban spaces through our locative information, they are exercising power over us, expecting us to be obedient or at least cooperative with their surveillance. This, however, often leads to tension, possibly provoking our resistance against their exercise of power. When resisting the power, we tend to define these people as unwanted others and develop digital social norms to block their access to our spatial privacy. For Chinese college students, however, to resist

their parents' spatial collateral surveillance is a thorny issue. China has a long tradition of filial piety, considering obedience to parents as a virtue (Hamilton, 1990, p. 77; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003, p. 209). The relationship between parents and offspring is certainly democratised in post-reform China, especially among urban nuclear families (Chambers, 2012, p. 149). This, to a certain extent, empowers young people to challenge the authority of their parents in certain scenarios. However, today's Chinese college students often share high levels of trust and intimacy with their parents (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 702). Most of them find it difficult to define their parents as unwanted others who have no right to access their spatial privacy on WeChat.

The story shared by participant Zhang is enlightening. Zhang introduced WeChat to her mother because its free instant messaging service helps them to keep in touch with each other. Zhang never had the experience of living far away from home until she attended university. Over the past two decades, she has developed a fairly strong emotional attachment to her parents. While being physically remote from home, Zhang is willing to use WeChat – the mobile-based social networking application that she uses every day – to maintain the emotional bond. However, Zhang soon realised that the connection with her mother on WeChat exposed her to her parents' spatial collateral surveillance, often leading to awkwardness. As Zhang described:

> There was one night I spent some time with my friends in a pub near our university campus. You know college students like me are old enough to drink, right? … I found the pub's decoration very stylish, so I took some pictures and shared them in my Moments… However, the next day when I woke up, I surprisingly found a message from my mother – 'How could you hang out in a club? This is absurd!'… This was the first time I noticed that she is actually using WeChat to spy on me.
>
> Zhang

In urban China, lifestyle has become increasingly westernised (Liu, 2011). Chinese young people, like their peers in the West, tend to see pubs as an ordinary social space to hang out with friends (L.-H. Liang, 2015; Matuszak, 2015). However, the older Chinese generation often holds a more conservative view, considering pubs as no-go areas often associated with hooliganism. In Zhang's case, this generation gap

contextually transforms her engagement with these spaces into a spatial privacy issue that has to be hidden from her parents. Similar to Zhang, Participant Liu is a Fourth Year college student who enjoys sharing locative information on WeChat. An observation of his Moments shows that he often generates Moments updates with location check-ins. However, he noted an example that explains how his parents' spatial surveillance raised his concerns over spatial privacy on WeChat. During a spring holiday, Liu spent a weekend with his girlfriend travelling to a famous tourist attraction. The hotel they stayed in was 'posh'. Liu wanted to upload a couple of snapshots, alongside location check-ins, in WeChat Moments to describe the hospitality they enjoyed. However, Liu's girlfriend stopped him, warning him that these photographs were probably not suitable to be seen by his parents. As Liu said,

> She told me not to share the pictures in WeChat Moments – because my parents would see… They would find out that we have been (sleeping) together if they saw we stayed in the same hotel room… They knew we have been in a relationship, but I have not yet told them we have that… It is a kind of awkward to let them recognise that, you know?
>
> Liu

As Liu's explanation demonstrates, the photographs, alongside location check-ins, reveal Liu and his girlfriend's particular mode of engagement with the hotel space (sleeping in the same room). By sharing this on WeChat Moments, it becomes associated with the young couple's spatial privacy when this young man's Moments updates are under his parents' scrutiny. Liu described his parents as members of the 'typical elderly generation' in China. As Moore (2005, p. 363) notes, 'dating and forming romantic relationships have long been prohibited in China, by Confucian-influenced families and, more recently dictate of the state'. While attitudes towards pre-marriage sexual activities have become more open in post-reform China, they are still much more restricted than in Western countries (Higgins & Sun, 2007, p. 33). In particular, elderly Chinese people often place a high value on virginity and view the pre-marriage sexual activity as highly unacceptable (Hoy, 2001, p. 263; X. Zhou, 1989, p. 279). They are not like their children – the post-90s generation college students, who tend to embrace a relatively casual attitude towards romance and enjoy taking pleasure from the relationship with their partners (Yang & Ling, 2009, p. 1,025). Conflicts between young people and their parents may be caused by their

differing understanding of romance and contrasting attitudes towards pre-marital sex. Under these circumstances, Liu's girlfriend was worried that his parents might ask for further explanation if they were aware that they had been sleeping together. To prevent causing awkwardness, Liu was persuaded to discard the update. He has become more discreet about his spatial privacy under his parents' spatial collateral surveillance since then.

The above examples indicate that the tension arising from the dynamics between parents and offspring makes spatial privacy protection a thorny issue for Chinese college students to address in their everyday use of WeChat. In urban China, the relationship between parents and their post-90s children has become increasingly democratised, owing to the shrinking size of family and the growing material prosperity (Chambers, 2012, 2016, Fong, 2004a, 2004b; Hjorth & Gu, 2012; Liu, 2011; Rich & Tsui, 2002). Chinese young people start having friend-like relationships with their parents (Chambers, 2012, 2016; Liu, 2011). Thus, leaving home for the first time to study at universities, homesickness is a new experience with which these young people have to cope through continuous interactions with their family. Today, WeChat is the most popular mobile-based social networking application used by Chinese people across different generations (CNNIC, 2014a, 2014b; Millward, 2015; Xiang, 2015). This technology provides an important channel that allows these young people to keep in touch with their parents after they move far away from home to attend universities in a strange city and live an entirely new environment.

However, while remaining in regular contact with their parents on WeChat, the content that Chinese college students share in Moments also provides their parents with a way to monitor and thereby regulate these young people's everyday lives. In particular, the shrinking size of the family also leads to a particular Chinese family culture whereby the only child is placed at the central heart of the home and receives a considerable amount of attention from his or her parents. The parents are so concerned about their children's well-being that they are keen to know where they visit and who they hang out with every day in the strange city far away from home. When Chinese college students leave clues about their everyday engagement with urban spaces in WeChat Moments updates, this information is often used by the parents to practise spatial collateral surveillance on these young people, thereby enabling them to continue parenting from a distance. The post-90s generation

Chinese college students, on the other hand, are highly individualised and value their personal realm (Liu, 2011). Their parents' spatial collateral surveillance, like any other modes of surveillance, is seen as a potential threat to the young people's personal realm (Miller, 2013; Miller et al., 2016, p. 90). This encourages these young people to develop new digital social norms, in order to resist their parents' spatial collateral surveillance.

### 7.5 Spatial Collateral Surveillance and Mobility in Urban Spaces

Chinese young people contextually manage personal boundaries to address parents' collateral surveillance. Their practices are neither new nor peculiar. Madianou and Miller (2012, 2013), for instance, found that social networking applications, such as Facebook, have become an important channel for Philippine migrant workers to maintain emotional connections with and, at the same time, exercise parenting on their left-behind children in the home country. However, while the migrant working parents are keen to monitor their offspring's everyday lives by observing their profiles and updates on Facebook, their left-behind children often block the parents' access to avoid being constantly monitored at the same time (Madianou & Miller, 2012, 2013). Chinese college students and their parents, however, share a more intimate relationship, owing to the socio-cultural changes taking place in the home in the late-modern China. While completely blocking parents' access would be considered inappropriate, the Chinese college students have to develop more contextual and sophisticated digital social norms to cope with their parents' collateral surveillance. Furthermore, the above findings by Madianou and Miller (2012, 2013) describe the techniques that younger generations employed to cope with parents' collateral surveillance in pre-mobile social networking era. This study, however, paid little attention to the spatiality of surveillance and privacy on mobile-based social networking applications.

Through the present netnographic research, I found that Chinese college students develop new digital social norms to contextually address their parents' spatial collateral surveillance by changing their mobility in urban spaces. For instance, participant Fu is a Third Year female college student who describes herself as an 'active' WeChat user who shares Moments updates on an almost everyday basis. Fu's experience of spatial collateral surveillance is closely connected with her parents, who are always keen to supervise where she is supposed to visit and what

she is supposed to do every day. Similar to many other Chinese college student participants, Fu had never left her parents until three years ago when she graduated from high school. WeChat is the most frequently used digital communication technology that Fu uses to keep in touch with her parents since she started at university. Fu never denied that WeChat was important in terms of maintaining the emotional bonds with her parents. However, she found that her connection with parents on WeChat was limiting the range of spaces with which she felt comfortable to engage, despite the fact that her parents did not interfering directly.

Fu's parents are typical of Chinese parents in the way that they pay great attention to their children's education (Dillon, 2009, p. 66; Liu, 2011, p. 61). They have hinted that they are worried that, without their supervision, she might be dragged down by 'bad influences' at the university. Fu understood the hint because Fu's parents often talk about how their colleague's only son became addicted to drugs after becoming involved with the wrong crowd in college. Fu's parents are very protective and are keen to eliminate any possible negative influences on their daughter – even though the young woman is obedient and has rarely created troubles in the past. Apart from who she socialises with, Fu's parents are also concerned about what spaces Fu engages with for her everyday life in the university. While chatting with parents, Fu noticed that her parents often describe pubs, night clubs, and karaoke bars as 'no-go' spaces. She is aware that her parents might also use WeChat to monitor whether she visits these 'no-go' spaces.

Although reluctant, Fu has developed a unique practice to cope with her parents' spatial collateral surveillance on WeChat by redefining the range of her mobility in the urban spaces. When hanging out with friends, she always takes photographs and uploads them to WeChat Moments. Most importantly, she also attaches location check-ins alongside the Moments updates to ensure that the locative information of where she went resonates with the visual archives of what she did there (see Figure 21). These updates certainly include self-presentation implications[42], but they also address the need for Fu's parents to be kept informed of her everyday life in the urban city. An attached location check-in certifies the accuracy of the information that she provides because it is difficult to fake. Fu said that she does not block her

[42] For details please see Chapter 5 – Self-Presentation and Personalisation of Space.

parents' access to her WeChat Moments because she does not want to disappoint them. Thus, while spatial collateral surveillance on WeChat allows Fu's parents to know her whereabouts without constant correspondence, this often stopped Fu from engaging with spaces which her parents describe as 'inappropriate'.


Figure 21. Fu's Moments Updates with Location Check-ins

Describing the Activities to Which She Attends with Friends

How spatial collateral surveillance limits young people's range of mobility in urban spaces not only applies to my Chinese college student participants but is also found among users of other mobile-based social networking applications. The study by Boesen et al. (2010, p. 70), for example, found that children may avoid entering spaces that are considered 'not safe' by parents if the parents are able to trace their locative information through location-based services. Similarly, a young husband may keep away from problematic spaces, such as ex-girlfriend's home, if his wife is able to monitor him through location-based services (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012). However, we cannot assume that parents' spatial collateral surveillance only restricts young people's mobility in urban spaces. This, under certain circumstances, may empower them to experience spaces which they may have never been to as well. Still referring to the spatial collateral surveillance between parents and children, a teenager may also feel freer when visiting 'appropriate' spaces, such as a close

friend's home (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 141). This is because the teenager does not have to constantly report his or her whereabouts to parents, who are able to gather his or her locative information without calling directly (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 141). Furthermore, technologies, such as 'Fake GPS Location' facilitates young people to manipulate the positioning of their mobile phones, allowing them to provide falsified locative information (FakeGPSLocation, 2015). For instance, de Souza e Silva and Firth (2012, pp. 146–147) found that the users of mobile-based social networking applications, such as Latitude, may check in at false locations to avoid disclosing their true locations to certain friends.

Participant Lei's practice provides a good illustration of how Chinese young people are empowered to increase the range of their mobility in urban spaces by revealing falsified locative information to their parents on mobile-based social networking applications. Lei is a Second Year college student. The 19-year-old is in a long distance relation with his girlfriend who studies at a city thousand miles away. During a summer holiday, Participant Lei wanted to visit his girlfriend but was worried that his parents might object to the plan. He then decided to disguise the visit by making use of falsified location check-ins. It is worthwhile mentioning that Lei's major is Electronic Information Engineering. He described himself as a 'tech geek' who is enthusiastic about technological inventions. Lei installed various applications on his mobile phone – including one called 'Mock GPS Pro' – that allow him to manipulate the GPS positioning of his mobile phone (see Figure 22 for how to use 'Mock GPS Pro'). In order to visit his girlfriend without requesting permission, Lei invented a pseudo-event, telling his parents that his university were organising an event. Lei told his parents that he was participating in the event and, therefore, would not be able to go home during the summer vacation. He actually travelled thousands of miles to meet his girlfriend but provided a couple of location check-ins in WeChat Moments showing that he was not away. This trick empowered Lei to visit his girlfriend without possible disruptions from his parents, despite his parents' spatial surveillance continuing as usual. Lei said that he might not be able to enjoy the summer holiday with his girlfriend if he did not fake the location check-ins to mock up his participation in a pseudo-event organised by his university.


Figure 22. The Interface of 'Mock GPS Pro'

Retrieved From (admin, 2012)[43]

The above examples clearly show that the personal boundaries of spatial privacy that Chinese college students manage in their use of WeChat are not fixed simply by adding people who are known and rejecting people who were not known to them. The majority of Chinese college students' contacts on WeChat are known to them, but these contacts always carry different characteristics as well. Partners, close friends, casual acquaintances, parents, relatives – the long list of their descriptions goes on. These various types of contacts share varying levels of intimacy, emotional support, mutual understanding, and most importantly power relationships with the students. These young people, thus, behave differently according to who they interact with and how the interactions are facilitated (Chambers, 2013, p. 66). The disclosure of spatiality may help Chinese college students to practise self-presentation when facing the majority of the semi-public[44]. At the same time, these young people have to cope with specific individuals – especially their parents – who continuously monitor their mobility in urban spaces at the same time.

[43] N.B. Users May Change Their Locations by Deactivating GPS Whilst Switching On IP-Based Location Service. The First Switch is IP-Based Location Service (Status: Off). The Second is GPS (Status: On).

[44] For details please see Chapter 5 – Self-Presentation and Personalisation of Space.

Chinese college students have developed digital social norms to address their spatial privacy under their parents' surveillance, possibly by changing their mobility in urban spaces. While the surveillance may limit the students' mobility in certain scenarios, it can also empower them in other scenarios. This exemplifies that spatial collateral surveillance is a particular mode of surveillance practice, which has a direct and significant impact on the being-monitored young people's mobility and influences the range of spaces with which they may engage in their everyday lives. The impact of parents' spatial collateral surveillance on Chinese college students' mobility in urban spaces once again resonates with the main argument of the present thesis, showing that Chinese young people's participation on mobile-based social networking applications cannot be separated or detached from their everyday engagement with the spaces in which their bodies are situated. In the past, these spatial experiences were not so apparent or straightforward when people use social networking applications, since their access to these technologies was based upon fixed computing devices, such as desktop or laptop computers (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 118). Their mobility in and engagement with spaces, therefore, did not significantly influence the data that they generated and accessed (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 118). However, the emergence of smart mobile phones has changed the ways in which social networking applications are used, enabling young people to access the services at any time, wherever they are. While location-based services on mobile-based social networking applications display their spatial tracks, the post-90s Chinese young people's concerns over spatial privacy spontaneously influence their engagement and experiences with spaces, shaping how they move and how they behave in urban spaces to cope with spatial collateral surveillance. This shows that the mediation of young people's digital social norms has to be studied with a focus on how spaces are experienced when they use mobile-based social networking applications.

### 7.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed how surveillance operates on WeChat and how it leads to Chinese college students' concerns over spatial privacy. This analysis helps explain aspects of digital social norms with a focus on the interplay between locative information and spatial collateral surveillance on mobile social media. Specifically, WeChat, alongside its location-based services, encourages urban Chinese youths to

share their engagement with urban spaces in their everyday lives. This, paradoxically, creates concerns over a new kind of privacy – spatial privacy. The display of engagement with particular spaces may refer to self-presentation practices, enabling users to effectively present those aspects of self that they wish to present. However, the display of these spatial experiences facilitates spatial collateral surveillance, contextually shaping certain experiences into spatial privacy. To protect spatial privacy, Chinese young people are also keen to manage personal boundaries that determine who can access their locative information and under what circumstances they have the access. While strangers share no pre-existing trust with them, these young people are likely to be considered as the unwanted others who are excluded by these personal boundaries. This encourages Chinese college students to develop digital social norms to address strangers' spatial collateral surveillance. In particular, women are physically and socially constructed as vulnerable beings in China. This leads to many female Chinese college students' discreetness in using location-based stranger social plug-ins on WeChat. However, strangers' spatial collateral surveillance also offers opportunities, forming a way in which friendships and romance may be developed in Chinese university campus. Thus, male Chinese college students, as well as some of their brave female colleagues, are challenging the definition of strangers as unwanted others. They are willing to accept being monitored by strangers, showing how the design of mobile-based social networking applications successfully encourages privacy-sharing culture among Chinese young people.

Furthermore, spatial privacy not only relates to strangers' spatial collateral surveillance. In the present netnographic enquiry, I found that the tension of the power relationship between Chinese college students and their parents emerges. This continuously influences how Chinese college students protect their spatial privacy regarding their parents' spatial collateral surveillance. The tension of power relationship emerges, because – while Chinese college students regard WeChat as a channel to manage intimacy with parents, their parents are keen to use this as a channel to exercise parental responsibility. Parents monitor their offspring's everyday engagement with urban spaces because they are worried that these young people may visit spaces that are not safe. This tension contextually transforms parents into unwanted others. However, owing to high-level of intimacy shared between family members in the home in contemporary China, Chinese college students do not

completely block their parents' access to their personal WeChat Moments. While the parents' spatial collateral surveillance continues, the students develop new digital social norms to address the surveillance by changing their mobility in the urban spaces. The connections between the use of WeChat and users' mobility in urban spaces become a particular dimension of the digital social norms emerging with Chinese young people's use of the mobile-based social networking applications.

This chapter makes a particular theoretical contribution to debates on privacy and space. On mobile-based social networking applications, privacy and collateral surveillance have become increasingly spatial. This resonates with my argument of the relevance of a new materialism in understanding the digital social norms emerging with Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications. As I have addressed in the previous chapters, our use of digital communication technologies by no means creates a homogenised virtual space, but facilitates new ways to experience the spaces in which our bodies are situated (Brewer & Dourish, 2008; Dourish, 2006). While our bodies cannot be withdrawn from the spaces, our mobility in and engagement with spaces plays an important role in shaping our everyday practices of using these technologies. In particular, young people's spatial mobility and engagement become significant when they use mobile-based social networking applications. An emphasis on the entwinement of their engagement with spaces and their use of the applications provides media and cultural researchers with a new angle from which to scrutinise digital social norms.

# Chapter 8. Conclusion:

## Toward an Interdisciplinary Approach to Urban Chinese Youths' Digital Social Norms

### 8.1 An Overview

This thesis presents a study of how the adoption of mobile-based social networking applications changes Chinese young people's life experiences in urban cities. Today, urban Chinese young people's everyday lives are undergoing fundamental changes. They have entered a late-modern age in which they are encouraged to explore new things (Giddens, 1991). In particular, the innovation of technology plays a crucial role in framing the characteristics of this age. The advent of the internet and associated digital communication technologies has dramatically changed how individuals socialise with each other, as well as how they engage with and experience the outside world (Castells, 2000, 2007, 2008, 2009). Among the different types of new digital communication technologies, mobile-based social networking applications are the ones setting the trends. Instagram, Line, the Facebook mobile application, as well as WeChat – a long list of mobile-based social networking applications has been launched on the market and attracted millions of young people over the past few years. The adoption of mobile-based social networking applications is having a significant impact on the society by constantly mediating the ways in which urban Chinese young people, as well as their Western peers, interact with each other and the outside world. The mediation shapes digital social norms, defining how and why these young people use the technologies in particular ways.

Mobile-based social networking applications have a number of unique characteristics, significantly influencing the mediation of digital social norms to which urban Chinese young people adhere. These applications are built upon Web 2.0 technologies. Web 2.0 characteristics encourage users to create and circulate content, consequently forming the applications into affective networks which internet giants employ to govern user attention for business interests (Cote, 2014; Cote & Pybus, 2007; Dean, 2010). In the meantime, these applications are designed to be used on personal portable mobile devices mainly for urban residents (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012). Urban Chinese young people carry mobile devices with them while travelling in urban spaces. The ability to use mobile-based social networking applications in

motion significantly influences the data that these young people access and generate via these technologies (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012). The ways in which mobile-based social networking applications are used are subtly inscribed in the dynamics of these young people's social life experiences in the urban cities when they are engaging with different spaces.

In this thesis, I have presented my enquiry into the digital social norms emerging with urban Chinese young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications through an original netnographic study of the post-90s Chinese college students' use of WeChat. The outcomes of this research, however, not only help understand the digital social norms emerging with this particular form of technology among the Chinese younger generations, but also offer a series of digital culture theories that speaks to a broader audience. In the rest of this concluding chapter, I shall briefly rearticulate what I have achieved in this thesis in both theoretical and empirical terms. Building upon the salient points that have previously been made, I would like to provide readers with guidance to understand the implications of my arguments for a cognitive understanding of the relations between these technologies and the socio-cultures of people's everyday lives.

### 8.2 Mobile-Based Social Networking Application, and Living in the Urban Cities

The present empirical study of Chinese college students' use of WeChat serves as a shop window, providing a glimpse into how the individualism and self-reflexivity shared by the Chinese younger generations are reflected in their everyday use of the mobile-based social networking applications. As mentioned in the previous chapters, the use of mobile-based social networking applications in China is very much an urban phenomenon shared amongst urban young people. Since the reform of China, urban Chinese population have experienced massive changes in a number of aspects of their everyday lives. The post-90s generation urban residents are always the most advantaged group, reaping the greatest benefits from the dramatic social changes in the patterns of consumption and technological developments. These urban young people enjoy a particular late-modern lifestyle characterised by material prosperity and individualism. Living in the urban cities, they value personal choices and are able to purchase the latest technologies for various social purposes. However, the empirical data gathered from the present research provide not only a descriptive and socio-cultural account of how particular social groups use one

particular mobile-based social networking application – WeChat – but also an analysis that helps develop a new theoretical understanding of the logic and reasoning behind the ways in which young people use similar mobile technologies.

For any users of social networking applications, there are three main issues: self-presentation, social network expansion, and privacy protection. These three aspects of practices do not describe all the features of digital social norms emerging with mobile-based social networking applications. Nevertheless, while self-presentation describes how young people frame their presence on social networking applications for further social activities (boyd, 2011), social network expansion and privacy protection capture how they address the social opportunities and potential risks associated with their everyday use of these applications (Chambers, 2013; Livingstone, 2008). Sharing key characteristics with traditional social networking applications, mobile-based social networking applications are also technologies mainly used for similar purposes. An understanding of urban Chinese young people's digital social norms cannot overlook the three aforementioned key dimensions of practices in their everyday use of the technologies. In the previous chapters, I have provided an account of the digital social norms emerging with mobile-based social networking applications by unpacking how the three key dimensions of practices are reflected in Chinese college students' everyday use of WeChat.

With a focus on self-presentation, I have uncovered how Chinese college students' practices relate to their continuous engagement with spaces in the urban cities[45]. Following Goffman's (1959, 1963, 1967) symbolic interactionism, we can see self-presentation as a form of stage performance-like activities through which a person's self-image is presented and managed via the use of available signs and symbols. In the past, literature has explored how people use gestures, verbal or visual signs to communicate identities in a different context (Chambers, 2013; Goffman, 1959). However, the empirical data that I gathered through my year-long netnographic enquiry[46] indicate an emerging set of practices shared by Chinese college students. This set of practices relates to the use of locative information for self-presentation

[45] For details please see Chapter 5 – Self-Presentation and Personalisation of Space.
[46] For details about the execution of my netnographic enquiry, please see Chapter 3 – Netnographic Research Method and My Empirical Data Collection.

purposes. I have discovered that Chinese college students often intentionally generate Moments updates with location check-ins to reveal their locative information on WeChat. A simple location check-in appears to be neutral, accurately pinpointing a user's real-time physical position in the urban cities. However, Chinese college students usually present their locative information alongside visual archives of their everyday life episodes – the archives describing or capturing their subjective engagement with particular urban spaces. The presentation of location (revealing locative information), combining the performances of everyday practices (sharing visual archives of personal life episodes), personalises the meanings of the spaces with which these young people engage for their everyday practices, becoming an emerging way through which self-presentation can be practised on mobile-based social networking applications.

The emerging mode of self-presentation, which is practised via personalisation of space, allows Chinese college students to display their distinctive tastes, revealing the individualised personal characteristics of the post-90s Chinese younger generation. This is a reflection and expression of the rise of individualism and self-reflexivity among Chinese younger generations, against a backdrop of the Westernisation of lifestyle in urban China (Hjorth & Gu, 2012). It should be noted that my findings of the spatially-articulated self-presentation practices are not peculiar to my Chinese college students; they resonate with the studies of how Westerners use similar mobile-based/location-based social networking applications to practise self-presentation in Western urban cities as well (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012; Humphreys, 2007). My empirical data, alongside the previous literature, show that spatiality and engagement with urban spaces have become increasingly important to younger generation users of today's mobile-based social networking applications. This account of self-presentation sheds new light on the studies of digital social norms. It has developed an interdisciplinary theoretical approach which combines the strengths of symbolic interactionism and new materialism to understanding the important connection between urban young people's bodily engagement with urban spaces and their everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications.

Highlighting urban Chinese young people's bodily engagement with urban spaces, my netnographic data also shows how sharing spatial proximity – i.e. short relative distance – in urban spaces becomes an important factor encouraging Chinese

college students to interact with strangers on WeChat. Scholars, such as Haythornthwaite (2002, 2005), developed the concept of 'latent ties' to describe the social capital potential of the possible but yet activated connections between strangers. The ways in which Chinese college students' social interaction with strangers are framed by sharing spatial proximity adds a spatial dimension, illustrating how young people manage and develop personal social networks on mobile-based social networking applications through articulating their spatiality in urban spaces. My Chinese college student participants' practices in this respect are also influenced by their particular experiences of urban spaces in the contemporary Chinese context, following their migration from hometown a university in an unfamiliar city. However, urbanisation, alongside the late-modern urban lifestyle, has become ubiquitous in both the East Asian and the West. Interactions between people who were previously unknown to each other are often discouraged in cities because of the rise of what Goffman (1963, pp. 132–133) calls 'civil inattention' in the late-modern society. This leads to the alienation of urban spaces, which, paradoxically, prompts urban residents' desire for adventurous social encounters with strangers for the purpose of making friends or developing romantic relationships. Under these circumstances, the architecture of mobile-based social networking applications, which incorporates location-based stranger social plug-ins, redefines sharing spatial proximity as an opportunity for young urban residents to explore this adventurous form of social encounters. This ultimately shapes the spatial proximity-based negotiation of social encounters as a normalised practice shared among young people who would like to develop friendships or romance through using the applications.

While urban Chinese young people use location-based services on mobile-based social networking applications to practise self-presentation and develop social networks, these uses also raise new issues that contextually discourage their involvement in spatially-articulated practices. One of the most significant issues refers to spatial privacy[47]. Privacy on mobile-based social networking applications has also become spatially articulated because locative information becomes an important dimension of the personal data that young people reveal on the applications. The ways in which urban Chinese young people manage and protect

[47] For details please see Chapter 7 – Spatial Privacy and Spatial Collateral Surveillance.

spatial privacy on WeChat are highly contextual, subject to whom they interact with and in what scenarios the encounters take place. In particular, though the present netnographic enquiry, I discovered that WeChat has become an important channel for Chinese college students to keep in touch with not only their friends and peers but also their parents and relatives. These young people reveal their locative information on personal profiles, often leading to their parents' collateral surveillance over these young people's everyday engagement with urban spaces for parenting purposes. For these young people, the undesirability of parents' spatial collateral surveillance creates tensions between parents and offspring, requiring these young people to develop social techniques to address the circumstances. Because they share a close relationship with parents, Chinese college students often do not block their parents' access to their locative information completely. Instead, self-initiated changes to mobility in urban spaces have become an emerging normalised practice that these young people employ to cope with spatial collateral surveillance. These findings, once again, resonate with the key argument of my thesis, articulating how digital social norms to which young people adhere on mobile-based social networking applications are framed in relation to both their socio-cultural experiences and their everyday engagement with urban spaces.

My above findings are revealed through the analysis of the empirical data that I gathered through my netnographic enquiry. These netnographic empirical data provide an in-depth and detailed account of how digital social norms are mediated in young people's everyday use of mobile-based social networking applications. Netnographic research method, having been justified in Chapter 3, is undeniable highly subjective in the analysis. However, as my above discussion illustrates, the findings of the present netnographic enquiry are neither intended to be read as a descriptive work nor provide an over-generalised enquiry result. Rather than a simple empirical understanding of recruited Chinese college student participants' use of WeChat, the findings aim to generate thought-provoking and theoretical-oriented contributions to the knowledge by examining and developing the relevant ideas presented in the existing literature. While the empirical research focuses on urban Chinese young people's bodily engagement with urban spaces, it provides a critical perspective on understanding how these young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications relates to their everyday lives in both the physically and socially defined urban context – a perspective which has rarely been mentioned in

the existing scholarship of social networking application studies in the pre-mobile era. The present empirical enquiry practice, in this way, allows the thesis to speak to a broader audience and contribute to the further development of a spatiality-centred understanding of digital social norms, digital communication technology use, and young people's everyday practices in urban cities.

### 8.3 A Synthesis of Affect Theory/New Materialism and Cultural Studies

Engaging in a dialogue with the empirical data that I gathered, this thesis proposes an interdisciplinary approach which synthesises affect theory and everyday practice literature to understanding how digital communication technologies become adopted by young people. This approach suggests that technologies, including mobile-based social networking applications, neither create digital cultures nor are determined by cultures. The technologies influence how young people behave in their everyday lives through an affective feedback loop through which affects are circulated.

The affects emerging with human's bodily encounters with digital communication technologies continuously influence how the human bodies move and how the technologies are designed and developed. Scrutinising the circulation of affects in users' everyday lives uncovers a complex and dynamic process through which digital social norms and digital cultures are formed. Taking WeChat, for example, this is a mobile-based social networking application launched by the Chinese internet giant – Tencent. While the central aim of the company's operation is to generate profits, the design of the technology is, to a certain extent, defined by the internet giant's business interests. Thus, the ways in which urban Chinese young people use WeChat are significantly influenced by the internet giants' business interests through the affective design (i.e. a form of material thresholds being defined by the designers[48]), of the technology. Mobile-based social networking applications are designed to be affective networks in which affects are constantly generated and circulated by users themselves (Dean, 2010). Personal profile, Moments, stranger social plug-ins – Tencent's software engineers integrate a long list of functionalities together on WeChat. These functionalities encourage users to generate their own original content – the important source of affects circulated among the affective networks. This affective design, building on Web 2.0, maximises the amount of time

[48] For details please see Chapter 4 – A Synthesis of Affect Theory and Everyday Practice Scope.

that urban Chinese young people spend on using the application, whilst providing them with a pseudo-empowerment that they have complete control over the use of the technologies.

The synthesis of affect theory and everyday practice approach applies to the studies of almost all digital communication technologies built on Web 2.0. This leads to the debates of how the design of digital communication technologies reflects digital business governance in the era of the attention economy. Goldhaber (1997, 2006) explains that, while information is abundant due to the emergence of the internet, attention has become one of the most scarce resources in contemporary economic sectors. Companies, especially the companies in the information and communication technology industry, are always seeking ways to accumulate user attention (Goldhaber, 1997, 2006). These internet giants, including Tencent and their Western counterparts, utilise affective design to maximise the amount of time that young people spend on the applications launched by them. The amount of attention that users pay during their active time on the applications, therefore, is accumulated, becoming the scare resources that the internet giants gain for tangible profitability (e.g. through selling to advertisers or charging for additional services)[49]. Following this logic, affects, which emerge with the relational encounters between human bodies and technologies, are central to understanding why young people adopt a particular digital communication technology and how their everyday practices are influenced by their use of that technology.

The creative combination of affect theory and everyday practice literature provides a new angle from which to scrutinise the mediation of digital social norms, avoiding the incomplete socio-cultural deterministic view which has long been employed in the existing literature of digital communication technologies. Among the studies of technologies, a genre of scholarship often relies on a socio-cultural interpretation of the context in which young people's everyday use of digital communication technologies takes place. For instance, Hjorth and Gu (2012), and Liu's (2011) literature interprets the modes of Chinese younger generations' use of the internet by referring to the Chinese socio-cultural context. This literature emphasises how urban Chinese young people use the technologies in accordance with the characteristics of

[49] For details please see Chapter 4 – An Affective Account of Digital Social Norms.

contemporary Chinese culture, reflecting the rise of individualism and self-reflexivity (Hjorth & Gu, 2012; Liu, 2011). Undoubtedly useful, this literature, however, failed to take into account the central role that technologies play in the mediation of human practices. The affective account, by emphasising the design of technologies and users' bodily encounters with the technologies brings the debates of everyday practices to a new level at which technologies' role is acknowledged and valued.

Resolving the limitations of the socio-cultural deterministic approach, this interdisciplinary approach, however, by no means returns to an old technological determinism (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, 2003). The mediation of young people's everyday practices has to be understood as a complex and dynamic process in which their use of the technologies is not completely determined by the affective design. However, rather than merely emphasising users' agency to resist, this account provides a relational consideration between socio-culture and materiality through conceptualising an entwined 'associated environment' in which the affects are transmitted (Ash, 2015a, p. 84). This associated environment is contextually defined by how a digital communication technology is used by people, and how it works with other technologies and in relation to its users' surroundings (Ash, 2015a). Following this perspective, we have to position the understanding of how urban young people's everyday practices are influenced by technologies with a focus on a particular socially-materially-defined environment in which the technologies are used.

Space helps unpack the abstract conceptualisation of an associated environment in the studies of urban young people's use of mobile-based social networking applications. Since the advent of the internet, electronic engineers (Busquets-Monge, Bordonau, Boroyevich, & Somavilla, 2004), as well as media and cultural researchers (Markham, 1998; Pertierra, 2005), often use the phrase 'virtual space' to describe the internet as an environment for human activities. The conceptualisation of virtual space has also been adopted by media and cultural researchers, such as Buffardi and Campbell (2008), Gentile et al. (2012), and Mehdizadeh (2010), to describe an imaginary spatiality of users when the interactions between them take place on digital communication technologies. A central argument we may refine from their scholarship is that users of the internet and digital communication technologies are invited to withdraw their bodies from physical spaces to participate in an abstract virtual space. However, as I have previously noted, young people's everyday

practices are mediated in relation to the affects emerging with their bodily encounters with technologies in a socio-culturally- and materially-defined associated environment. While the affects attract young people's attention, their bodies are still situated in a space, which is defined by their physical surroundings and their subjective engagement with the surroundings (Brewer & Dourish, 2008; de Certeau, 1984; Dourish, 2006). Young people's bodily encounters with surroundings also generate affects, influencing how these young people use technologies. These affects, however, are overlooked by the virtual space perspective, which leads to an incomplete understanding of digital social norms and digital cultures as well.

The critiques of virtual space bring the debates of spatiality to a new materialistic scope through which the virtual/spatial dualism becomes abolished. New materialism follows a monist tradition which critiques any types of unhelpful dualism (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012). This philosophical approach advocates the importance of 'thing-power' in people's everyday practices, resonating with the concept of affects and emphasising how human practices are mediated in relation to the encounters between human bodies, technologies, and other non-artificial objects (Bennett, 2009; Parikka, 2012). With a particular focus on space and spatiality, the new materialistic approach reminds us that space is neither a virtual imagination nor a simple physical architecture. It is an entwinement of socio-culture and materiality created via people's subjective but concrete engagement with and experiences of their surroundings. Spaces provide an associated environment for affects to transmit, continuously defining how people's everyday practices are influenced by the affects.

To unpack how technologies influence everyday practices, an interdisciplinary approach which synthesises new materialism and symbolic interactionism is employed to understanding how these technologies influence young people's experiences of and engagement with urban spaces. The formation of digital social norms, therefore, may be unpacked by following how these technologies contextually facilitate young people to negotiate their experiences of being in the world. In the previous chapters, I have used a concept – interface – to describe how mobile-based social networking applications work in helping Chinese young people experience urban spaces. Interfaces describe the meeting points that transform 'the relations between bodies and their environments' (Gane & Beer, 2008, p. 61). Two or more spaces become connected as soon as interfaces enable any modes of interactions

between/among them. Under these circumstances, young people are interacting with not only their immediate surroundings but also their communication partners' immediate surroundings. These different affects emerge when these encounters between different entities dynamically change how they move and behave.

The synthesis of new materialism and symbolic interactionism is particularly important to the study of people's use of emerging mobile-based social networking applications and other location-based social media in urban cities. These technologies are used on mobile devices, which young people carry with them when they are moving through urban spaces. As they move from one space to another, the spatially defined context of their use of the technologies becomes dynamic and constantly changing. Furthermore, the integration of location-based services within mobile-based social networking applications maximises the affectivity of encountering the surroundings when young people are experiencing different spaces. This encourages young people to constantly modify their attention to different things that they encounter, requiring them to develop new techniques to cope with this modification of attention. This approach extends the debates of digital social norms and digital communication technologies by introducing a spatial scope to the traditional cultural approaches; it enables us to rethink the relationships between cultures and technologies in contemporary young residents' everyday lives in urban cities.

### 8.4 A Summary and Future Study

Overall, this thesis has constructed a theoretical framework based upon a creative mixture of new materialism/affect theory and traditional cultural studies approach (e.g. symbolic interactionism). This interdisciplinary theoretical framework avoids the vague dichotomy of sociality/materiality and the unhelpful dualism of virtual/physical spaces, both of which have been constantly reproduced in the existing literature in media and cultural studies. This new approach helps articulate how the mobile-based usage of today's digital communication technologies relates to and changes young people's everyday practices in the urban cities, ultimately forming new digital cultures and new digital social norms. The theoretical framework not only applies to the study of Chinese college students' use of WeChat; it may be of interest to scholars to examine its potential applicability to the study of similar technologies, such as Line, Instagram, and Snapchat.

Furthermore, reviewing human history, we find that technological innovation never stops. In terms of mobile-based social networking applications, the integrated location-based services are making urban young people's social networking practices sensitive to the spatiality of their everyday lives. Today, academics and engineers, as well as mass media and the general public, have begun to discuss the 'internet of things', 3-D printing, as well as wearable technologies (Guinard, Fischer, & Trifa, 2010; Kopetz, 2011; Ruddick, 2016; Tuters & Varnelis, 2006; Xia, Yang, Wang, & Vinel, 2010). The realisation of these technologies is expected to create an ever more significant and entwined connection between individuals, their surroundings, and the technologies they use in everyday urban lives. For future researchers, it may be worth paying particular attention to the future innovation of these technologies, and developing new theoretical approaches to address, study, and explore the possible issues that will emerge with young people's use of these technologies.

## Appendices

### Appendix A. Questionnaire

The Rise of Digital Social Norms: A Case of Online Social Networks 数字社交习俗的兴起：以在线社交网络为例

The study attempts to explore the way in which contemporary Chinese college students socialise on WeChat. This project will contribute to an understanding of emerging digital social norms in Chinese college students' digital social encounters on online social networks. The data you provide will be used for the research purpose of this project only. It will not be shared with any other organisation or individual (including other researchers).

该研究项目试图探索当代中国大学生在使用微信时的社交方式。该研究项目将帮助我们更好地理解中国大学生在线社交所产生的社交习俗。您为该研究提供的数据将仅被用于该项目的研究目的。这些数据不会被与任何其他组织或个人（包括其他研究人员）分享。

1. Do you have a WeChat account? (你有微信账号吗？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Yes (有)  (请跳至第 2 题)

○ b. No (没有)  (请跳至第 30 题)

2. How many friends do you have on WeChat? (你在微信上有多少好友？) [填空题] [必答题]

_____

3. How many of your friends on WeChat are those whom you have never met in person? (你在微信上有几位现实里从未见过的好友？) [填空题] [必答题]

_____

4. What is your current WeChat ID? (你微信账号的名字是什么？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. My real name (我的真名)

○ b. My online nickname I usually use(我常用的网络昵称)

○ c. A unique online nickname I almost only use on WeChat(我基本只用于微信的昵称)

○ d. Other (其他) _____ *

5. What place of origin do you suggest on WeChat? (你的微信账号显示的你的所在地是？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. My hometown(我的家乡)

○ b. The city of my university (我大学所在城市)

○ c. China without specifying the city (中国：不具体到城市)

○ d. Other (其他) _____ *

6. Do you often change your profile image? (你会经常改变你的微信头像吗？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Very often (经常)

○ b. Sometimes (有时候)

○ c. Rarely (很少)

○ d. Never (从不)

7. Do you often change your status (what's up)? (你经常改变你的微信状态吗？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Very often (经常)

○ b. Sometimes (有时候)

○ c. Rarely (很少)

○ d. Never (从不)

8. Generally speaking, do you often update new information in your Moments? (你是否经常在朋友圈发布新的信息？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Very often (经常)

○ b. Sometimes (有时候)

○ c. Rarely (很少)

○ d. Never (从不)

9. While travelling, do you often take photos for interesting things and upload to your Moments? (旅游时，你经常为有趣的事物拍照然后上传到朋友圈吗？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Very often (经常)

○ b. Sometimes (有时候)

○ c. Rarely (很少)

○ d. Never (从不)

10. Do you often specify your current location when uploading images to your Moments? (在朋友圈上传照片，你是否会显示你目前所处位置？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Very often (经常)

○ b. Sometimes (有时候)

○ c. Rarely (很少)

○ d. Never (从不)

11. Generally speaking, do you often comment on your WeChat friends' Moments updates? (你是否经常评论微信好友的朋友圈更新？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Very often (经常)

○ b. Sometimes (有时候)

○ c. Rarely (很少)

○ d. Never (从不)

12. Which of the following reasons can best describe why you comment on WeChat friends' Moments updates? (以下哪种原因可以最好地解释你为什么评论微信好友的朋友圈更新？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. To show the WeChat friend that I care about him or her （向这个朋友表达我关心他或者她）

○ b. A way of greeting （一种打招呼的方式）

○ c. An alternative way to communicate with the WeChat friend instead of sending him or her

instant messages （除了直接发送即时消息之外，和该朋友交流的另一种方式）

○ d. Other （其他） _____ *

13. Do you often reply your friends' comments on your WeChat Moments updates? (你是否通常会回复好友在你朋友圈更新的评论？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Very often(通常)

○ b. Sometimes(有时候)

○ c. Rarely(很少)

○ d. Never(从不)

14. Why do you think it is important to reply their comments on your WeChat Moments updates? (你为什么认为应该回复好友在你朋友圈更新的评论？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. It shows my politeness (这是我表达礼貌的方式)

○ b. It is a way to show I care about him or her (通过这种方式表达我关心他/ 她)

○ c. It a way to inform a conversation with him or her (通过这种方式和他/ 她交流)

○ d. Other(其他) _____ *

15. Do you often take photos for food and uploading to your Moments? (你经常为食物拍照，然后上传到朋友圈吗？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Very often (经常)

○ b. Sometimes (有时候)

○ c. Rarely (很少)

○ d. Never (从不)

16. Which of the following reasons can best describe why you upload photos of food? (一下哪个原因可以最好地解释你为什么在朋友圈上传关于食物的照片？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. When I went to a fancy/ special restaurant （当我去了一家高档或者特别的餐厅）

○ b. When I ate a delicious/ special dish （当我吃了一种美味或者特别的菜肴）

○ c. When I cooked a delicious/ special dish （当我煮了一种美味或者特别的菜肴）

○ d. When I cooked a dish for a special person, e.g. my parents, best friends, or girlfriend/ boyfriend （当我为一个特别的人，比如我的父母，好朋友，或者男/ 女朋友煮了食物）

○ e. Other （其他） _____ *

17. What kind of caption do you usually upload for a Moment image update? (你通常喜欢为好友圈的图片更新配什么样的文字描述？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. A short paragraph or several sentences that fully describe the background of the image (一个短的段落或者几句话详细描述照片的背景)

○ b. A sentence or several phrases that describe the general background of the image (一句话或几个短语简单描述照片的背景)

○ c. A short paragraph or several sentences, but it is irrelevant to the image （一个短的段落或者几句话，但与该图片无关）

○ d. A sentence or several phrases, but it is irrelevant to the image （一句话或几个短语，但与该图片无关）

○ e. No caption (没有文字描述)

○ f. Other (其他) _____ *

18. Do you see updating your Moments as a way to: (你把发布好友圈更新看做：) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. To present a moment of my life to my WeChat friends (向微信好友展示我当下的生活的一个片段)

○ b. To keep online diaries for my own interest(我自己记网络日志的兴趣爱好)

○ c. To inform communications with my WeChat friends (制造和微信好友交流的机会)

○ d. Other (其他) _____ *

19. Have you ever post or repost information relating to any following issues in the Moments? (你在微信朋友圈是否曾发布或者转载过以下信息？) [多选题] [必答题]

□ a. Political news (时政新闻)

□ b. Local news (本地新闻)

□ c. Sports news (体育新闻)

□ d. Technology news, e.g. release of latest iPhone （科技新闻，例如最新发布的苹果手机）

□ e. Entertainment news, e.g. celebrity gossips（娱乐新闻，如明星绯闻）

□ f. Fashion consumption, e.g. release of a new handbag （时尚消费，如最新发布的手袋）

□ g. Food information （美食信息）

□ h. Other （其他） _____ *

20. Are your parents also your friends on WeChat? (你的父母和你是否为微信好友？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Yes (是的) (请跳至第 21 题)

○ b. No (不是) (请跳至第 25 题)

21. Have you ever discarded a Moment update, because you think it is inappropriate to be seen by your parents (你是否曾因为担心不适合被父母看到，而放弃一个朋友圈的更新？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Yes (是的)

○ b. No (不是)

○ c. Other (其他) _____ *

22. If yes, do you block your parents' access to your Moments in privacy setting? (你是否在隐私设置里禁止父母查看你的朋友圈更新？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Yes (是的)

○ b. No (不是)

○ c. Other (其他) _____ *

23. Do you often comment on your parents' Moments updates? (你是否经常评论你父母的朋友圈更新) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Yes (是的)

○ b. No (不是)

○ c. Other (其他) _____ *

24. Do you reply your parents, if they comment on your Moments updates? (如果你的父母评论你的朋友圈更新，你是否会回复他们的评论？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Yes (是的)

○ b. No (不是)

○ c. Other(其他) _____ *

25. Have you tried to communicate with strangers on WeChat? (你尝试过在微信上和陌生人交流吗？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Yes (有过)  (请跳至第 26 题)

○ b. No (没有)  (请跳至第 31 题)

26. Generally speaking, what kind of method you would like to use so as to find a stranger and communicate with? (你更愿意通过什么办法和陌生人交流？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Through “shake” service showing you live nearby (通过摇一摇显示你们住的不远)

○ b. Through “shake” service showing you live far away(通过摇一摇显示你们离得很远)

○ c. Through “look around” (通过“附近”发现)

○ d. Through “drift bottle” (通过漂流瓶添加)

○ e. Through “add by ID” (通过 ID 查找)

○ f. No preference (没有偏好)

○ g. Other (其他) _____ *

27. Generally speaking, do you have gender preference when you communicate with strangers on WeChat? (你更喜欢使用微信和什么样的陌生人交流) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Of the opposite gender (异性)

○ b. Of the same gender (同性)

○ c. No preference (没有偏好)

○ d. Other (其他) _____ *

28. Generally speaking, do you prefer to communicate with a stranger whose profile image reveals his or her appearance? (你是否倾向于和使用本人照片作为头像的陌生人交流？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Yes (是的)

○ b. No (不是)

○ c. No preference (没有偏好)

○ d. Other (其他) _____ *

29. Generally speaking, do you prefer to communicate with strangers whose Moments posts revealed their appearance? (你倾向于和朋友圈内发布本人照片的陌生人交流吗？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Yes (是的)

○ b. No (不是)

○ c. No preference (没有偏好)

○ d. Other (其他) _____ *

30.Have you ever arranged a meeting with a stranger whom you came across on WeChat? （你是否尝试过和微信上遇到的陌生人见面？） [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Yes （有过）

○ b. No （没有）

○ c. Other （其他） _____ *

31. How old are you? (你的年纪是多少？) _____ [填空题] [必答题]

32. What is your gender? (你的性别是什么？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Male (男性)

○ b. Female (女性)

33. Are you the only-child in your family? (你是独生子女吗？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Yes (是的)

○ b. No (不是)

34. What is your place of origin? Please specify the City and the Province/ Municipality （你来自哪里？请注明省份城市/直辖市） [填空题] [必答题]

_____

35. Do you classify your place of origin as rural or urban area? (你来自城市还是农村？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Rural area (乡村)

○ b. Urban area (城市)

○ c. Other (其他) _____ *

36. Which year are you in? (你在念几年级？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Year 1 Undergraduate (本科一年级)

○ b. Year 2 Undergraduate (本科二年级)

○ c. Year 3 Undergraduate (本科三年级)

○ d. Year 4 Undergraduate (本科四年级)

○ e. Other (其他) _____ *

37. What is your academic background? (你的学术背景是什么？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Arts (文科)

○ b. Business (商科)

○ c. Social Science （社会科学）

○ d. Science (理科)

○ e. Engineering (工科)

○ f. Other _____ *

38. What is your father's occupation? (你父亲的职业是什么？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. private entrepreneur （私有企业业主）

○ b. government official （政府官员）

○ c. Government employee（政府雇员）

○ d. clerical worker （企业职员）

○ e. professional (e.g. engineer, college teacher, doctor, or lawyer) （技术职员，例如工程师、大学教师、医生、律师）

○ f. Teacher （教师）

○ g. Manager （企业管理人员）

○ h. Self-employed （个体户）

○ i. Farmer（农民）

○ j. Migrant worker （农民工）

○ k. Labour worker （工人）

○ l. Other（其他） _____ *

39. What is your mother's occupation? (你母亲的职业是什么？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. private entrepreneur (私有企业业主)

○ b. government official (政府官员)

○ c. Government employee （政府雇员）

○ d. clerical worker （企业职员）

○ e. professional (e.g. engineer, college teacher, doctor, or lawyer) （技术职员，例如工程师、大学教师、医生、律师）

○ f. Teacher （教师）

○ g. Manager （企业管理人员）

○ h. Self-employed （个体户）

○ i. Farmer（农民）

○ j. Migrant worker （农民工）

○ k. Labour worker （工人）

○ l. Other（其他） _____ *

40. How much does your mobile phone cost? (你的手机价值多少钱？) [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Less than 1,500 RMB (1500 元以下)

○ b. 1,501 to 2,500 RMB (1501 至 2500 元)

○ c. 2,501 to 3,500 RMB (2501 至 3500 元)

○ d. More than 3501 RMB （3501 元以上）

○ e. Other (其他) _____ *

41. Would you like to participate in further research? [单选题] [必答题]

○ a. Yes （E-mail address) _____ *

○ b. No

**Appendix B. Information Sheet**

**Working Title:** The Rise of Digital Social Norms: A Case Study of Online Social Networks

**Researcher:** Yuzhu Peng

**Researcher's contact details:** y.peng5@ncl.ac.uk

**Sponsoring institution:** Newcastle University

**Details of the project:** This project will conduct a netnographic research (including observations and interviews) to study the way in which Chinese college students use WeChat. For observation purposes, I would like to have permission to access your WeChat account. I would like to analyse your posts. I would also like to conduct an online interview with you and ask you questions about how you use this online social network. The duration of the interview is about 60 minutes.

**Purpose of the research:** The aim of this study is to explore digital social norms. This project will entail a case study of Chinese students in home universities, and their uses of Facebook respectively. It will contribute to an understanding of China's young generation's use of online social networks and emerging digital social norms. The observation will require an access to your posts on WeChat Moments. The interview may involve sensitive questions, such as your relationships. Therefore complete confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured.

**Terms for withdrawal:** You are free to withdraw from the project at any time and any stage.

**Use of data:** The data you provide will be used for academic purpose only. I will not share your data with other researchers unless I have your permission.

**Storage of data:** In order to ensure complete confidentiality, your data will be anonymised immediately after it has been collected. It will be securely stored in my PhD PC and memory stick. No one else will be able to access your data.

**Participant:**

**Researcher:**

## Appendix C. Consent Form

**Working Title of Project:** The Rise of Digital Social Norms: A Case Study of Online Social Networks

**Name of Researcher:** Yuzhu Peng

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet dated _____. | ☐ |
| 2. | I understand the researcher will access WeChat Moments and collect data for analysis. | ☐ |
| 3. | I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn. | ☐ |
| 4. | The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained to me (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.). | ☐ |
| 5. | The use of the data in research has been explained to me. I know that the data I provide is to be anonymous. | ☐ |
| 6. | I voluntarily agree to participate in the project. | ☐ |
| 7. | I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form. | ☐ |

**Participant:**

**Researcher:**

## Appendix D. Examples of Netnographic Field Notes

### Participant Euc's Profile

Euc is the 6th participants in my netnographic research. He has completed the online questionnaire (i.e. the quantitative part of my research) and suggested that he would like to engage in the following netnography. I therefore e-mailed him and arranged the first face-to-face meeting with him. Before the interview, I explained the aims and the exact procedures of the netnographic research. He was fully aware of what information he would contribute to the research and agreed my usage of the data he provided. We both signed and dated an information sheet and a consent form to demonstrate that his participation in the netnography is of a voluntary nature.

The face-to-face with Euc was conducted in a coffee shop where he usually visits. The venue of interview was chosen by him so as to provide him a familiar environment. Euc is a talkative person who is passionate of engaging in the research. He is enthusiastic about sharing his experience in using WeChat. The conversation with him was smooth and in depth. Numerous detailed and interesting issues relating to social norms in WeChat use were raised through the interview. A series in depth and rich data were obtained for analysis.

Euc is a 20 year-old male. He is a Year 2 college student from Business School. He grew up in a typical urban Chinese family. His father is a middle-level manager in a private enterprise. His mother is a government employee in the local city council in his hometown. He is the only child in his family. He has 3 years' experience of using WeChat. He began to use WeChat Moments since approximately two years ago. Currently, he has 252 contacts on WeChat. About 100 of them are friends and acquaintances he knew before entering the university, while less than 150 are his college school mates. He also has a maximum of eight to ten contacts are strangers whom he met through WeChat. They are all females being added through stranger social function on WeChat.

He comes from an urban city in Inner Mongolia in the Northern China. His hometown is more than 2,500 kilo metres away from the place where his university is located in. He has to travel across the distance four times a year (for going home for spring and summer vacations and coming back to the university when semester begins). He

notes that he almost always has to travel alone by himself in these periodical long-distance journeys. He often feels lonely during the journey and therefore is willing to communicate with other people who are present in his physical surroundings. By talking to people, he is able to escape from the hungers of solitude to some degree. For example, in July 2014 when he was on a flight back to his hometown, a girl who sited next to him asked him for help, because she could not move her heavy luggage. He helped her. As a respond to his kindness, she smiled to him and asked him where he was travelling to. He told her the purpose of this flight trip. A good rapport between them was thereby developed within this process of phatic communication. This leaded to further interactions between them two. They continued the conversation during the two and a half hours flight journey. Although they did not exchange contact details so as to transfer each other into friends in their everyday lives, the conversations between him and the girl made the boring trip a joyful journey. This is a good example that exemplifies how interactions with strangers while travelling can serve to ease loneliness.

However, not all strangers are proper communicative partners. Euc notes that those others who he communicates with during a trip are being carefully selected. In other words, he only talks to a person who looks friendly and is willing to talk to him. He notes the process of communications with a stranger always refer to a pre-confirmation phase. The pre-confirmation phase involves limited but meaningful interactions, such as eye contacts and gestures, as well as other body languages. For example, exchange of smiles is an important signal to identify whether the stranger is friendly or not. If he smiles to a stranger and the stranger smiles to him as a respond, it is likely that the person is willing to have a conversation with him. Conversely, if a stranger ignores his smile or even reveals disgust of him, it is very likely that the person does not welcome any further communication with him. Euc said that people who are not willing to talk are more often encountered in his experience of travelling. He therefore has to deploy other methods to dealing with the feeling of loneliness in a journey.

Euc usually uses media to decrease his involvement with the physical surroundings by engaging in imagined mediated spaces. Individuals always employ media interfaces as ways of re-negotiating their interactions with surrounding space (de Souza e Silva and Frith 2012, p.15). By engaging in imagined mediated dimension of

space, they are able to pay selected attention to the physical surroundings. In conventional cases, books, journals, and other kinds of printed materials can act as media interfaces that facilitate people to reduce their involvement with the physical outside world. Following Farman's (2011, p.119) notion, the action of reading requires readers to focus on the printed materials.

> "Only when a text is read aloud does it enter the sphere of the exterior, ground space. Otherwise, the text is ingested internally as a function between the eye and the individual." (Farman 2011, p.119)

Focusing on written text, people have to withdraw their attentions to the physical surroundings. This action minimises people's contacts with other people presented in the physical surroundings. In some measurements, reading printed materials in public space can be seen as a representation indicating they have partially withdrawn their attention to the physical surroundings. This way of understanding is exemplified in Euc's experience as well. He said when he was travelling alone by a flight. He would like to talk to people to ease the feeling of loneliness. However, if there were no people who are willing to have conversations with him, he would choose to read a book or a free in-flight magazine. He engages in reading these printed materials so as to pay attention to the texts and gain a sense of being separated from the physical space. In this way, he significantly reduces opportunities direct contacts with those other people who are not willing to communicate, despite minimised interactions with them still remain (e.g. giving ways to the person setting next to him when he or she wants to go to the toilet).

Mobile gadgets function similar in changing people's relation with the physical surroundings. Like books, journals, and other printed materials, cellular mobile phones facilitate users to privatise public spaces from the physical social surroundings when they participate in a personal conversation with distant others (de Souza e Silva and Frith 2012, p.79). Since the prevalence of smart phones, mobile-based online social networks, such as WeChat, are extensively installed in people's portable mobile devices. The employment of online social networking services on mobile phones enhances users to engage in interactions with plural others simultaneously and conveniently. People communicate with friends on online social networks through various available means (e.g. practices of observing other people'

WeChat Moments updates and leaving commentaries and Like Tags on these updates). The shift of main attention to distant friends reshapes their relations with the social surroundings and other people who appear in the social surroundings.

Euc notes that WeChat use is another common option to avoid awkwardness of being ignored by strangers while travelling through a public transportation system (apart from on an airplane). He enjoys using WeChat while travelling on a public transportation system when mobile internet signal is available. When he does not communicate with the strangers next to him, he usually takes out his mobile phones and logs in WeChat to check friends' recent Moments updates. Those Moments updates frame potential opportunities of interactions between him and his WeChat contacts. The interactions with friends across distance become active as soon as he sends an instant message to a friend or leaves commentaries or Like Tags on the friend's Moments updates. By activating interactions with friends remotely, Euc is able to signify that he has partially disconnected with the physical surrounding. The transience in both physical dimension (his physical presence in the real world) and mediated dimension of spaces (his interactions with friends) assists him to achieve a feeling of freedom and comfort. Without breaching the social norms, he is able to reduce his involvement in the physical dimension of space and therefore minimise interactions with cold or unfriendly strangers to some extent.

The possibility of using WeChat while travelling is not only used to change a user's relation with the physical surroundings, but also applied to represent the self by checking in his or her location in imagined mediated dimensions. Literature regarding mobile technology, e.g. de Souza e Silva and Firth (2012) and Gordon and de Souza e Silva (2011), illustrates that location can be represented in people's digital encounters. On location-based Social Networks, a user can check in a place to broadcast their physical location to other people (de Souza e Silva and Firth 2012, p.167). This mode of behaviour facilitates the establishment of "a sense of embodied integrity that is aware of the self's place as that which is always already situated in relationship to the location of others" (Farman 2011, p.27). The user broadcasts location information to present the self. In this mode of practices, the presence of other people who access the location information facilitates the configuration of this user's awareness of his or her location and the construction of social meanings of this location. For instance, checking a fancy restaurant or an expensive club might

be used to indicate a user's good tastes. Likewise, checking a famous cultural tourist spot might be manipulated to reveal a user's sophisticated lifestyle as well. Thereby, certain dimension of self is represented through checking in a place on online social networks.

An observation of Euc's WeChat Moments reveals that photographs being taken while travelling are an important theme of his updates. These photographs appear to signify his physical location. The display of location in WeChat Moments can be seen as a mode of self-representation in his practices. For example, during the summer vacation, he spent a week to travel around Suzhou city (a Chinese city famous for cultural tourism). His physical mobility during that period therefore was recorded and represented in WeChat Moments. For example, on 21st July 2014 (the first day of the trip), he posted a Moments update that includes seven images. Those images are photographs of representative architectures and landscape spots that he came across on that day. Likewise, his three sequential Moments updates on 23rd July (two updates) and 28th July 2014 (one updates) show a similar pattern. Almost all are images of landscapes that he visited on that day. Furthermore, one of the photographs being posted on 28th July 2014 is a photograph taken on a train. It is a snapshot of trees and railways outside the window. The shape of the sceneries in the image is blurred, revealing the motion of the train when the photograph was taken. In addition, Euc provided a caption for this image, saying that "it is a period of this journey". This image update can be seen as a close up of his journey. These aforementioned photographs of symbolical sceneries and landscape spots taken while visiting a place become archives of his travelling experience. Euc's WeChat friends can access these archives to know the physical locations that he visited during the tour. In this way, Euc's physical locations are represented in online dimension.

The representation of physical locations is also a way of self-representation. Euc notes that the images being posted during the trip involves a process of careful selection. Specifically, only those representative landscape spots or sceneries are chosen to be displayed in his WeChat Moments. In his understanding, Suzhou is a symbol of traditional Chinese watery region culture. Therefore, these images were selected following the criteria. Although Suzhou is now a typical modernised metropolis, no images of modern buildings appear in Euc's Moments updates. He

posted snapshots of traditional architectures, such as memorial arches, landscape gardens, as well as galleries of lanterns and embroideries. All these photographs were taken in these locations that visually symbolise traditional parts of Suzhou and conventional Chinese watery region culture. The cultural meanings of material objects therefore were attached to the visual representation of locations. He shared these images to reveal that he visited these places, whereby he connoted his appreciation of traditional Chinese culture. These cultural meanings of the locations were spontaneously and subconsciously conveyed to those WeChat friends who accessed his Moments updates. Under these circumstances, Euc represented his sophisticated taste of traditional Chinese culture though these image travelling archives. This case thus exemplifies how self-representation is achieved in practices of location representation through mobile-based online social networks.

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