

Social Media Marketing and Consumer - Brand Relationship in Luxury Markets

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Abstract

Given the shift from traditional to new communication approaches, luxury brands are strategically focusing on social media marketing – SMM - for product and services' endorsement through daily narratives. Nowadays, social media is an integral part of marketing and advertising. Social media communication is a growing area of interest for scholars in fashion marketing. In being a two-way platform for communication, by allowing users to share information and interact with each other, but also with influencers, SMM tools may represent a fundamental tool to increase customer consciousness and improve customer relationships in the competitive and diversified Chinese luxury fashion marketing.

This study aims to analyze how WeChat, a Chinese social media platform that has become the main trendsetter for luxury fashion brands in China, can impact customer relations with luxury fashion brands and purchase intention. As an exploratory qualitative study, the contribution is interpretive rather than causal, and it addresses a gap in understanding about how WeChat-mediated interactions are viewed to shape intimacy, trust, and brand consciousness in Chinese luxury contexts. Because the empirical data was obtained in 2018, the conclusions should be considered as historically relevant rather than reflective of current market conditions.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Customer Relationship, Luxury Chinese Market, WeChat.

1. The Evolution of Social Media Marketing in the Chinese Luxury Market

China and Japan dominate the Asia-Pacific region's (APAC) personal luxury goods market, which is the world's largest. The luxury products market value of the region is dominated by China and Japan, contributing to over half of the total. In the process of shopping for luxury goods, customers not only pay a high price for the item itself,

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but they also pay a premium price for the service that comes along with it. Nevertheless, the luxury shopping experience has undergone a transformation in recent years, as e-commerce and social media platforms have become increasingly prevalent (Statista, 2025). In addition, in this new emerging context, the setting and SMM interactions of young luxury clients impact their perception of luxury. (Slaton & Hurst, 2023).

Recognising the uniqueness, originality, and exclusiveness status of luxury, contrary to the democratization nature of social media, in its wideness of customer reach and interactivity as well as information sharing, luxury fashion brands were only recently totally embracing social media for customer relations and engagement (Dauriz, Remy, and Sandri 2014). As a result, if in the past Internet and Social Media Marketing (SMM) was considered as a taboo, a challenge to exclusivity and rarity conceptualisation for luxury brands (Heine 2010; Kapferer 2014), the fast-growing economies, and in particular China, were recently proving that luxury fashion brands had to start to turn towards SMM to provide a 360 degrees luxury experience and value to the customers (Kim and Ko 2010; 2012; Rovai, 2018).

The last decade has witnessed an increasing presence of digitalisation in the luxury industry, and academia has started to analyse its positive impact on communication as well as on operations and customer relations with the brand (Dacko 2017; Demirkan and Spohrer 2014). Because of the emergence of digitalisation in luxury, academia started to focus on the comparison of online and offline (in-store) customer behavior and relation with luxury brands, in particular in fashion (Guercini et al. 2018). In the online relation between consumer and brand, price, convenience, and product availability have proven to be the key influencing factors, while in the offline, the aesthetic appeal, shopping experience, and consumer in-store service were evidenced as the main ones (Liu et al. 2013).

However, other studies have highlighted that tangibles, physical as well as interactive experiences must be integrated to better promote and communicate the essence of luxury products and consequently to strengthen their perceived value (Wu et al. 2015). Social media has been shown to be a fundamental tool for consumer decision-making as well as for luxury brand-customer relationship development. By creating a strong and innovative consumer impact on the brand value and identity (Pentina et al. 2018) through sharing consumption experiences, feedback, and reactions on the social media platforms, luxury brand consumers appear to influence the content and the essence of the brand storytelling and, in so doing contribute to generating brand significance (Von Wallpach, Hemetsberger and Espersen 2017).

Social network platforms provide users with specific tools to stay connected amongst themselves and to share content, but more importantly, personal experiences. Luxury fashion brands have started to understand the potential of social media and, consequently, they have invested in feeding social media communities of users through specific platforms.

As enhanced by Chu et al. (2013), due to the fast-growing adoption of luxury goods advertising in social media, more empirical research is required to examine young customers' behaviours, attitudes, and responses to SM advertising. While in Western countries they have found common non-geographical bound platforms, the situation

has appeared different in China, because of the institutional barriers to the use of those platforms in the local market and the presence of different ones. With the increasing presence and critical importance of the millennial segment in the Chinese consumer market, local SMMs have provided luxury brands a privileged way to engage the millennial luxury segment and to strengthen the relationship with the brand that requires a more in-depth understanding. Brands have established a connection between SMM activities and the enhancement of brand awareness, which in turn facilitates the development of trust. However, the transformation of trust into purchase intention through SMM remains uncertain (Sarin et al., 2023).

Through the diverse SMM activities, including influencer relations, Word of Mouth (WOM), information sharing, luxury brands aim at optimising the information diffusion as well as the customer relationship (Thomas et al, 2012; Keller and Berry, 2003) and influencing the social media followers' choices (Gladwell, 2000). Previous studies (Kim and Ko 2010; Pentina et al. 2018) have provided an in-depth fundamental frame of studies for SMM, customer relationship, and engagement in the context of luxury fashion at a global level; those scholars have enhanced the positive impact of social media on customer relationships with luxury brands despite the contrasting exclusivity nature of luxury. Kim and Ko (2010; 2012) have highlighted how SMM increases customer intimacy and engagement with luxury fashion brands as well as consumer engagement (Dhaoui 2014; Pentina et al 2018). Even though academic research in the field has taken its distance from a conceptualization of consumers as passive receivers of brand knowledge (Gensler et al. 2013), academic research is still insufficient in investigating SMM customer relations with brands in a specific geographical context and the motivation of customers' involvement in the phenomenon (Alexander and Jaakkola 2016).

Word-of-mouth (WOM) has long been recognized as a key mode of communication in which consumers share information about products, services or companies (Della Rocas, 2003). Social media marketing activities are essential for boosting sales in the luxury goods sector, particularly if they provide a distinctive digital experience that mirrors the exclusive and personalized interactions found in physical luxury boutiques, as per McKinsey (August 2022). The resulting challenges in this online community market include the potential to tarnish the essence of luxury brands and experiences as a result of comments (Arrigo, 2018). Additionally, the perception of consumers is negatively impacted, as is the value of luxury fashion brands (Park et al., 2020). It is pertinent to comprehend the relationship between SMM Chinese customer relations and luxury fashion brands in the highly impactful Chinese luxury market, given the growing interest in the use of SMM by luxury brands and the increasing role played by the Chinese luxury market expansion for global brands, as a result of the proliferation of augmented social media, which has created new ways of doing business, enhanced by increased functionality and services (Appel et al., 2020). As luxury branding has become increasingly complex in the highly diversified Chinese market, despite not all netizens may afford luxury fashion brands (Rovai 2018), they may be brand advocates and consequently attempt to understand how SM had a role in reinforcing customer relations and purchase intention for luxury fashion brands. Following the previous studies' framework, this

study tries to examine the role of the main Chinese SMM tool, WeChat, in the customer relationship for luxury fashion brands, following a qualitative methodology. The analysis of SM WeChat will tentatively provide a more in-depth understanding of its impact on luxury fashion brands and customer relationships, brand consciousness, and purchase intention in the specific Chinese consumer luxury context. As a result, the specific objectives of the study are as follows: (a) to identify motivations of Chinese luxury customers to engage in WeChat for their relationship with luxury fashion brands, (b) to identify the SMM WeChat characteristics affecting customer relationship with luxury fashion brands – intimacy, trust and consciousness (c) to analyse the SMM WeChat induced customer relationship impact on luxury fashion brand purchase intention. Rather than aiming to confirm deterministic or causal correlations between social media use and consumer behaviour, this study contributes by providing interpretive insight into how consumers perceive and experience digital interactions. In doing so, the research enhances previous social media marketing and luxury relationship literature by adding a contextually grounded view of consumer-brand connections inside China's unique social media ecosystem.

In the following section, the theoretical framework that contextualizes this study will be provided, along with the main theories and concepts in the field. Next, the methodology will be explained, and the data collection will be reported, analyzed, and discussed. Further recommendations, limitations, and conclusions for current and further research will conclude the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Luxury Chinese Market, WeChat, and Customer Relationship

Luxury fashion brands have become increasingly present in the Chinese consumer market and lifestyle, and the role of purchasing luxury goods in experiencing a luxury lifestyle has taken on unexpected importance and meaning in the Chinese social context. The birth of the Chinese middle class has fuelled the emergence of a highly diversified consumer class with different purchasing attitudes (Latham 2006; Cavusgil and Guercini 2014; Cavusgil and Buckley 2016) and a new way to express their taste, their motivation for purchasing (Gillette 2010) and an increasing brand consciousness, mode of purchasing and conceptualisation of luxury (Rambourg 2014; Rovai 2016).

Luxury, historically an exclusive, rare, and elitist phenomenon, is enduring a significant transformation (Crevee et al., 2021) with a projected value of US\$471.49 billion by 2025 and a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 2.91% for the 2025–2030 period (Statista, 2025). In this context, many luxury brands successfully use social media for brand building (Godey et al., 2016; Stephen, 2020), with customers no longer playing their traditional roles as passive buyers– rather, proactively creating and capturing value by capitalizing on the resources of firms and digital platforms (Park, 2021). New-age technologies and Artificial Intelligence have had an

increasing influence on consumer purchasing experiences and retailing, as evidenced by the literature. Luxury fashion has shown to be influenced by a variety of variables, including technological advances that affect consumer behaviour and expectations (Rovai et al., 2023).

Chen and Zhang (2011), with respect to the evolution of the Chinese online consumer market, and Jung et al. (2014) evidenced the online mode's significant contribution to goods constant purchase growth in emerging consumer markets. China has shown an impressive orientation towards the digitalise world and a steady increase of Internet use in every business sector. Luxury fashion brands' strategy for China has become a joint of Internet technology applied to luxury business operations, with new challenges and opportunities for brand consciousness, identity, and customer relations. Even if nowadays luxury fashion customers in China are mainly composed by the adult/senior segment, a fast growth of the younger digitalised segment (about under 35 years old) is appearing at the horizon, demanding a totally different luxury consumption concept from traditional customers with its own luxury and fashion purchasing habits (Lu, 2011; Le Monkhouse et al., 2012) seemingly in constant evolution (Lu, 2011). The emerging Chinese consumer segments' behaviours and values have driven SMM for luxury fashion consumption in China, which has definitely started to rival and increasingly compete with the traditional luxury approach (Rambourg, 2014). In this context, the luxury market underwent significant sales growth in the past decade, with projected sales of over 330 billion euros for personal luxury goods in the next ten years (Shahid et al., 2021) with respect to 2014, when the luxury fashion market ended at 224 billion euros, representing a 3% growth at constant exchange rates, driven mostly by the online and outlet channels (Brondoni and Arrigo, 2014).

Chinese younger digitally savvy luxury consumer segments seeking social recognition and identity through their luxury consumption live the new luxury purchasing experiences differently (Ngai & Cho 2013) by relying on SMM platforms to live their “luxury experience”, to acquire brand consciousness, and to make their purchase choices (Rovai, 2018).

In the digitalization and SMM context, WeChat is showing its unique and interesting position for luxury brands and SMM customer relations with respect to its structure and evolution. WeChat was created in 2010 as a response to a domestic Chinese social media marketing platform, and it developed from a messaging application to a centralized, comprehensive SMM platform gathering approximately 900 million users. WeChat is considered an optimal platform for customer relationship management with specific capabilities of social engagement, thanks to its characteristics of proximity to Chinese consumers and its comprehensive digital ecosystem approach (Bonhomme, 2017).

Considering the uniqueness and successful development of WeChat as a comprehensive communication channel for the Chinese consumer market, this study fills a gap in academic research with respect to social media advertisement evolution and the motivations and impact associated with WeChat customer relations, brand consciousness, and purchase intention for luxury fashion brands in China.

2.2 SMM and Customer Relationship

The last decade has seen the emergence of a remarkable change in the communication sector for luxury because of the increasing presence of IT from fast-growing economies. The surge of digitalization in luxury has started to modify the customer relationship and engagement as well as reorienting communication towards an interactive and engaging mode with the customers (Dacko, 2017; Hristov & Reynolds 2015; Kumar et al., 2014; Pantano et al., 2018). The development of online communication has proven to be highly attractive for unique communication as well as highly engaging relationships with the customer. The new online evolution has started to prove being able to provide customers, for some new segments as the Millennial one, an enhanced digital experience, an information-increased product choice and a new luxury consciousness in an ongoing mode, in their language of choice, in any internet accessible geographical location and from any social media friendly tool, in particular smartphones (Pairin & Keng, 2003; Pantano & Verteramo, 2017). SMM has evidenced its combination of traditional and digital marketing tools that has the potential to impact a large number of users, thereby establishing brand trust and consumer awareness (Ajina, 2019; Chen & Lin, 2019). Miller et al. (2009) had evidenced the relevance of social media for the association that they provide between consumers and the community as well as in direct communication and advertising. Certainly, it has been accredited in marketing literature that, information consumers can have through interpersonal sources is critically impactful on the consumer engagement and decision-making process in comparison to the traditional advertising techniques (Goldsmith & Clark 2008). Even if others' feedback has always been impactful on consumers, SMM influencers have amplified it thanks to the freedom in disseminating brand-related information and purposely show brand preferences by e-word of mouth – eWOM (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Jansen et al., 2009; Knoll, 2016). The delegation of the transmission of a brand's message to third parties, such as influencers, has been a recent trend in strategic social media communications (Leban, 2021). Luxury fashion brands are starting to understand the impressive impact and growing potential of entering partnerships with social media influencers to promote their products. In this process, luxury brands are increasingly leaving the traditional advertising tools and channels to refocus on social media platforms and online events, influencers, and online shops, besides simple websites, to endorse and to add reputation to their products or services by relying on a higher credibility of their storytelling with respect to the traditional advertising approach (Abidin, 2016). Literature has evidenced the two primary categories of social media applications for luxury brand management in marketing and consumer response (Warsi et al., 2024), evidencing the positive effect of social media marketing activities on perceived masstige brand value, considerably affecting relationship characteristics (Srivasta & Sinha, 2025).

An approach that is positively evidenced by luxury brands in relation to their higher effectiveness in credibility and authenticity, and consequently lower resistance to the message conveyed for consumers (De Vries et al., 2012). In their Instagram, WeChat, RED, or Facebook posts, influencers have the power to have an impact on the

purchasing decision-making and engagement of a remarkable number of potential clients through a follower domino effect (Gladwell, 2000). Thanks to the SMM, influencers have the power to impact the decisions and behaviours of their followers (Dodds et al, 2003), in particular as a result of the speed in disseminating the information and creating a “buzz” effect in spreading information amongst followers that they have in common (Thomas, 2004). Consequently, luxury fashion brands capitalize on highly admired influencers to show, wear, and give an interpretation of their products and services on social media and leverage a new acquired customer relationship. Digital influencers can create a very close relationship with their followers because of the opportunity given to « live » influencers’ everyday lives and personal activities. Followers may find in the influencers the illusion of a face-to-face interaction that makes the followers more receptive to the latter’s influence (Knoll et al. 2016). Consequently, luxury fashion brands are increasingly trying to build a relationship with influencers to get their endorsement of products and services and create a customer relationship and increased brand consciousness (De Veirman et al., 2017).

In a highly competitive and diversified market as the Chinese luxury fashion consumer, where luxury fashion brands are still striving to increase brand consciousness and trust (Rovai & Bellini, 2018), luxury fashion brands are starting to rely on SMM to try to build an effective customer relationship. Relying on previous academic literature that evidenced the role of trust and intimacy (Kim and Ko 2010) as well as brand consciousness (Chu et al. 2013) in customer relationships, this study will examine the influence of SM WeChat on customer relationships and purchase intention through trust, intimacy, and consciousness.

2.3 Brand Intimacy, Trust, and Consciousness

Intimacy and trust as part of customer relations with luxury fashion brands within the SMM context have been initially studied and analysed by Kim and Ko (2010). The concept of intimacy has been associated to the feelings of closeness, connectedness (Sternberg, 1996) to a brand, implying the emotional relationship customers can develop with a certain brand and conducive to mature into feelings of trust (Elliot & Yannopoulou, 2007) as well as loyalty (Yim et al., 2008). The importance of intimacy for luxury fashion brands and customer relationships is linked to the long-lasting emotional relation characterizing intimacy (Sternberg 1996). However, intimacy with brands can be characterized and developed differently depending on the national culture (Atwal and Bryson 2014) and also impacting love for the brand and WOM (Ismail and Spinelli 2012). The study of intimacy (Wang and Lee, 2020) focuses on brand intimacy towards the fashion brand as a defined research context. Visual presentations and intimate relationships are particularly crucial for fashion brands (Moatti & Abecassis-Moedas, 2018). While brand intimacy can contribute to customer loyalty, existing research on the association between customer engagement and brand intimacy remains scarce.

Long-term intimacy with a brand brings trust, one of the keys to an enhanced long relationship with the customers. However, trust has to be obtained, and its timing and mode may be highly disrupted and influenced by the diverse consumer cultures. Previous studies (Bian & Forsythe, 2011; Kim & Ko, 2012) have shown how the eastern and western consumer cultures may have diverse elements affecting trust and can also have diverse perceptions of trust (Hofstede, 1998) affecting the resulting purchase intention. Clearly, a strong belief and awareness of a brand become a fundamental element in customer relationships, impacting purchasing intention.

A growing body of academia has examined brand consciousness, an important segment of consumer relations and behavior (Nelson & McLeod, 2005; Shim & Gehrt, 1996). Brand-conscious individuals are described as those who have a strong brand awareness and are actively engaged in becoming “brand savvy” through SMM (Keum et al. 2004). The level of brand consciousness may affect how consumers engage in the relationship with the brand and how they are receptive or contribute to the brand through SM to the final purchase intention.

Purchase intention is defined as the consumer’s possibility of purchasing in the future. Understanding consumers’ purchasing behavior is essential to a firm (Gautam & Sharma, 2017) to attract and retain its customers (Zhang & Kim, 2013). According to previous studies, purchase intention is strongly related to attitude and preference toward a brand, a service, or a product (Kim & Ko, 2010; Ko et al., 2009), and it may be strongly impacted and varied according to the culture of origin of the consumers (Li & Su, 2007; Bian & Forsythe, 2012). As customer relationships are built on attitude toward a brand, purchase intention is expected to be influenced by such relationships.

Relying on previous research in the field and on Kim and Ko's (2010) comprehensive study on SMM impact on customer relationship and purchase intention for luxury fashion brands, this study refers, adapts, and extends Kim and Ko's (2010) model for further empirical research with respect to the diversified Chinese luxury fashion consumer market and SM.

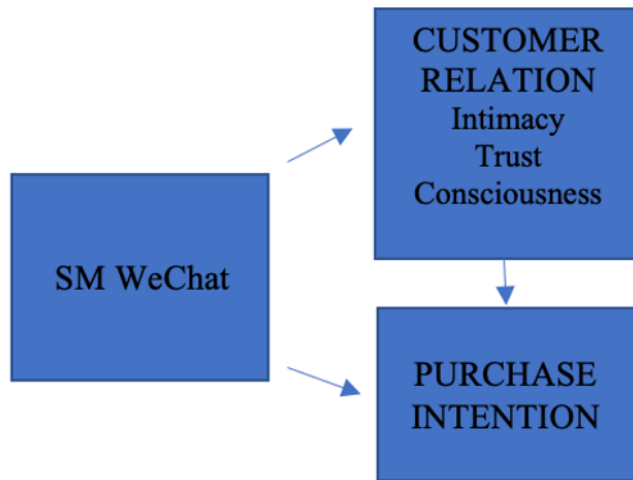
Research Question 1. What are the characteristics of WeChat for customer relationship and purchase intention with luxury fashion brands?

Research Question 2. How does each characteristic impact customer relationship (i.e., intimacy, trust, brand consciousness) and purchase intention?

- H1. SM WeChat has a positive impact on customer relationship – intimacy, trust, brand consciousness
- H2. SM WeChat has a positive impact on purchase intention.
- Research Question 3. What is the relationship between customer relationships (intimacy, trust, consciousness) and purchase intention?
- H3. Customer relationships (intimacy, trust and consciousness) will have a positive impact on purchase intention.

Figure 1 shows an expanded model from the proposed model (Kim & Ko 2010) for outlining the hypothesized relationships among SM WeChat, customer relationships, and purchase intention.

Figure 1: Research Model



The research model proposed in this study should be interpreted as an exploratory analytical lens rather than a predictive model. The dimensions of intimacy, trust, and brand consciousness are applied to inform about the qualitative interpretation of participant narratives and coordinate the analysis rather than to establish causal mechanisms or test universal relationships. This positioning supports the exploratory purpose of the research and allows the study to contribute theoretically through contextual elaboration of existing concepts rather than through formal hypothesis verification.

3. Methodology and Research Questions

The study, qualitative in its methodological choice, responds to the call for increased academic research following a qualitative approach for social media, instead of the numerous quantitative ones (Belk, 2017). It has been framed by the existing literature review in SMM, customer relations, and luxury brand management, with a specific focus on the Chinese SMM context. The literature evidenced a gap in research of SMM and luxury in the Chinese context, with the limited stage of research developed in SMM in the Chinese luxury context, its growing importance for the luxury sector, and the resulting need to acquire more knowledge. It was decided to follow the convenience sampling methodological approach, which is considered appropriate when the research objective is the definition and the identification of characteristics associated with a phenomenon and indicating its limitations (Miles et al., 2014). This study does not support causal inference. Convenience sampling was employed to acquire information-rich participants rather than to ensure representativeness. Data was analyzed using an iterative theme coding procedure that included familiarization, open coding, category

refinement, continual comparison, and interpretative consolidation. Hypotheses should be considered exploratory propositions.

Due to the limits in the literature review, the study has been referred to, but it has also tried to expand previous research in the field through an inductive approach with three hypotheses to be examined in empirical research. Data has been gathered through semi-structured interviews with a selected representative sample of luxury fashion brands' customers in Beijing and Shanghai between January and July/August 2018. The sample was composed of 30 luxury fashion frequent Chinese consumers, as well as 5 Chinese luxury fashion experts – Chinese designers and luxury fashion brand founders - in the field. A total of 35 interviews were held and transcribed, with half of those face-to-face and the remaining by social media – Skype.

The interviews (face-to-face and Skype) lasted approximately 45 minutes, and the respondents' relevant SM WeChat activity was consulted, reviewed, and noted. Both face-to-face and SM interviews followed a harmonised approach for both types of investigation. The first part of the interview guide focused on more open and general questions related to respondents' approach towards WeChat as well as luxury fashion brands and then narrowed the scope of the questions to more specific objectives of the study, such as their motivation, trust, intimacy, and habits in interacting on WeChat with luxury fashion brands. After each respondent shared data related to their approach to WeChat daily with respect to luxury and fashion, specific questions were asked on their motivation to use WeChat with respect to luxury fashion and if and in case they used SM WeChat to relate and interact with those fashion brands. Specific questions were asked (a) to identify motivations for Chinese luxury customers to engage in WeChat for their relationship with luxury fashion brands, (b) to identify the SMM WeChat characteristics affecting customer relationship with luxury fashion brands (c) to analyse the SMM WeChat induced customer relationship impact on brand consciousness and purchase intention.

The consumers' respondents' gender was mainly composed by Chinese women – 25 out of those 30 interviewed – aged between 25 and 30 years old, representing a specific target of professional that could be qualified as luxury customers by the fact that besides some of them being professional of the sector, they were purchasing at least one luxury fashion product per month – luxury professionals, businesswomen, luxury entrepreneurs.

Preliminary analysis did not reveal differences between males and females in the approach to the use of SM WeChat or in their relationship behaviours, motivations or intimacy; the sample was consequently considered appropriate for the study objectives. SM WeChat was confirmed to be the most frequently used SM platform in everyday life, as well as in relation to luxury fashion brands. According to the objectives of the study, it was avoided to focus on each behaviour and activity in the use that the respondents could have with respect to WeChat; it was decided to keep being consistent with the unit of analysis as per customer relationship, brand consciousness and purchase intentions in order to understand the phenomenon and not disperse the objective and the unit by focusing on the population (McCracken 1988). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and content-analyzed first in English and the content was firstly screened to try to categorise into the potential diverse

relationship behaviours, brand consciousness patterns, and purchase intentions. During the analysis, we used the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and completed the following analytic stages. At first, the main emerging themes had been acknowledged through a detailed analysis of the recurring patterns and areas (LeCompte and Schensul 1999); next a harmonised system of codes was created to enhance specific and common characteristics and drivers aligned to the study objectives; later the system of codes was used to compare, contrast and discuss the resulting findings to try to find recurrences (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). This research process made it possible to collect a set of qualitative data, a summary of which is presented in table 1.

Table 1: *Research Data Collection and Analysis*

Interview (code)	Place of interview	Respondent Professional Role	Customer Relation Properties Check *	Purchase Intention Presence	Representative Sentences
SH1	Shanghai	Luxury Fashion Product Manager	I T C	Yes	WeChat allows me to live with and for fashion brands. I can instantly be informed and share my appreciation and enthusiasm for new collections. At the beginning of luxury in China, WeChat helped me to become “fashion savvy” thanks to posts of influencers and brand ambassadors interactions
BE1	Beijing	Fashion Brand Manager	I T C	Yes	There are no SMs in China, WeChat is “the media app” for everyday. It gives me information and leads to what to the dresses I want to buy. If not expensive I buy on WeChat, it is so simple, it is all in the app, I do not need credit card or what! But if expensive I want to check in store. And it helps also to get my life more enjoyable!! I can talk with influencers and be in their life!!
BE2	Beijing	Luxury Fashion Brand Founder	I T C	Yes	I use WeChat to promote my brand but I don’t communicate too much on products but more on trends, news and giving also advices. Followers ask for advices on what to wear, how to wear, colours etc; it is a great way to get in touch with them and get them involved. But they do not buy my high-end line on WeChat but in the store.

BE3	Beijing	Luxury Concept Store Owner and GM	I T C		It is a great way to have my clients – and myself as well- participating in my concept store life. Thanks to how the app functions, I can do everything. Interact with my clients, invite them to event organised in the concept store, organise activities on WeChat and also a follow-up event in the store. And when I also want to know more about a fashion brand, I ask some WeChat groups some advice: they help me to decide if I want to buy or not from the brand, if they like it I buy it otherwise I do not always buy
BE4	Beijing	Concept Store Manager	I T	Yes	I love fashion and I love WeChat: it gives me the opportunity to share my enthusiasm and passion for fashion! When I see on the wall of fashion brands new collections, I wanna tell them what I think, what I feel! And when I cannot go to fashion shows, I look online! It is even better as I can share with the brand and community if I like or not and everybody, my friends, family, they can see it!
BE5	Beijing	Digital Marketer	I T C	Yes	WeChat is unique! It is the main application to have a 360 interaction with brands and live fashion brands!! I am constantly on WeChat as with my friends, we share information or we share our opinions about fashion style, fashion products, where to buy them and if buying online or not. And when a brand has a new great product or dress, we can also try to see online if it fits or suits us and our style. And when I post pictures of what I buy, and often my friends then buy the same!
BE6	Beijing	Digital Marketing Manager	I T	Yes	WeChat is China specific; this app reflects Chinese people need to share their emotions, status, richness!! I am quite knowledgeable in fashion brands and I do not need to be advised on them! But I want to express what I feel about them and be part of the brand. On WeChat, I can share my emotions with the community of a specific “brand lovers”, try to know where to buy limited editions, go and buy those and then go get a picture on a great place and post it!

SH2	Shanghai	Fashion Media Agency VP	I T C	Yes	I live on WeChat and I am part of my favourite fashion brands' on WeChat! When a brand organises an online fashion show, I participate and send my comments and emotions. Then, thanks to the up, I can also see if others in my surrounding are also following it and I can interact with them. Sometimes, other WeChatters or influencers make me change my idea on a brand!
SH3	Shanghai	Media Agency GM	I T C	Yes	I post, I comment, I express my emotions about my favourite fashion brands on WeChat! And brands share their insights, fashion shows, new products with me!!! I can also get information on the new collections, give my opinion about them and see how to wear those dresses, it is fantastic as if I want, with a simple click I can also buy it. And for national holidays or events I can also make a "red envelope" gift online.
SH4	Shanghai	Fashion Media Agency Manager	I T C	Yes	WeChat is the China app and it make us be part of the fashion brand story and life. I can post, text, like my favourite brands and also know more about their new collections and dresses I want to buy. I can also better understand brand values.
SH5	Shanghai	Fashion Media Agency Event Manager	I T C	Yes	Through WeChat, other users' comments and opinions and the information they share, I can understand what type of brand is, if it has ethical or social involvement and post what I think about it. But it also give me the opportunity to share with my friends and community but also with the brand what I purchased and how it suits me.
SK1	Skype	Fashion Brand Event Manager	I T C	Yes	When I was started working in the field, WeChat helped me to have a better knowledge of global luxury fashion brands, their history, their heritage. I could get specific information and investigate about a brand products and who was wearing it. I still search for new brands but now through influencers and brand lovers groups.

SK2	Skype	Fashion Writer	I T C	Yes	It is great to share my fashion brands experiences on WeChat! People see how I mix and match dresses, my style and I can also see others! I also often post on a fashion brand account my appreciation/like, it makes me feel part of their VIPs
SK3	Skype	Chinese Brand Creative Director	I T C	Yes	With my friends, we share information, like, emotions of how a brand can make us feel! And we also comment about their values, style, if we are inspired or not by a change in style.
SK4	Skype	Brand Journalist	I T C	Yes	Thumbs Up for WeChat!!It is part of our life, of our fashion lifestyle!!! We can like, comment, post our new outfits or copy those of top influencers!!But we can also how a brand is developing, changing in its trends and be always the first to be informed about limited editions!!
SK5	Skype	Luxury Travel Services Manager	I T C	Yes	WeChat allows you to have a good time in interacting with your favourite brand! I spend my free time, even when we are together with my friends, checking news and new trends from influencers or the same brands. I wanna be informed and then buy the top or most sought for products!
SK6	Skype	Designer	I C	Yes	WeChat is not an app, it is part of every Chinese everyday life. And for luxury fashion brands, I got a lot of information, advices, by influencers or community brand lovers, on new trends, styles, events related to a brand! It connect me with the brand
SK7	Skype	Restaurants COwner	I C	Yes	I am not so sure about my fashion style and WeChat helps me to get advices on what to wear, on which occasions, which brand is more fashionable and the new trends
SK8	Skype	Luxury Mall Director	I T	Yes	WeChat is my everyday tool to communicate and interact with friends, colleagues, family and share opinions, also about fashion brands. It connect me to the brand world and gives me the chance to express how I see the brand and how I live the brand; my posts of how I wear the brand clothes and accessories....in those posts I engage myself also in giving a brand perspective.

SK9	Skype	Fashion School Pedagogical Coordinator	I T C	Yes	In WeChat luxury fashion brands accounts, you do not find only purchasing oriented information or for sales, you have specific information about the brand heritage, essence, and how it developed. It also shares values that the brand has and I always read about those info and their advices as well. It makes me understand better the brand and if I can trust it. For example, I likea lot for the involvement they have in social activities to help women in need in China.
SK10	Skype	Architecture and Design company Designer	I C	Yes	Luxury Fashion brands on WeChat share their world with WeChat users: and I share my opinions with them and with the rest of the community; they also helped me to better understand fashion trends and the style of a brand and its heritage by sharing their experiences and texting me to answer to my questions
SK11	Skype	Fashion Internship Student	C		I mostly knew about Korean and Japanese fashion brands and through WeChat I could get more knowledge about western fashion brands and fashion style! I can see where these brands are born, they share with us their history and the life of their founders. They also help me to know how to dress in different occasions
SK12	Skype	Fashion Internship Student	C		I am still learning about foreign fashion and new luxury fashion brands; of course I know top French and Italian brands but I want to know more. For this reason I am also member of fashion brand lovers specific groups and also of those fashion brands accounts because they do not only sell products but they give information, news, advices...every day!
SK13	Skype	Cosmetic Brand Founder	I C	Yes	Thanks to WeChat, you can be part of a brand story and development. I use it to let me customers to better understand the value of my brand, its story and origin and I can also see what they think about the brand and let them be part of the story.

SK14	Skype	Fashion Store Manager	I C	Yes	When I started this job through WeChat could get more knowledge in the field and also start sharing my comments and emotions about a new fashion collection or also when I was buying a new dress, I was posting it on the fashion brand website. It is great that they allow to do it!
SK15	Skype	Luxury Hotel Trainee	I C	Yes	Before choosing what to buy, I get information and advices on WeChat. I share my needs and what I like, or I do not like, with the WeChat community or within WeChat specific groups. WeChat allows me to get specific information about the brand or a dress and I can text and interact with other users
SK16	Skype	Artist	C	Yes	WeChat is a useful interactive effective SM app and I could not think now to buy in luxury fashion without getting information or advices from WeChat community
SK17	Skype	Artist	I T C	Yes	WeChat share comprehensive interactive information, events, activities, about luxury fashion brands. I have fun to get posts and forward or share with family and friends. And when I buy something, as I am interested in sustainability, I also like to check the brand values and give my opinion, like or dislike
SK18	Skype	Designer	I T C	Yes	WeChat is an entertaining SM tool, easy and immediate to use in the reactions to some other users' posts and to your favourite brand shared activities and events. And when during an online fashion show or black Friday I want to immediately by a dress, I can do it even without a credit card
SK19	Skype	Real Estate Agency Owner	I C	Yes	I follow my favourite fashion brands and I text my friends but also to the brand what I think about their news, dresses, initiatives. I also use WeChat to share on my post where I buy my favourite brand dress and how I wear it.
SK20	Skype	Real Estate Agency Owner	I C	Yes	Thanks to WeChat, I can feel part of the fashion community and better understand the brand and its values. I usually also express my likes and dislikes, what I prefer and I also post how where and how I am wearing the brand and how I buy it

SK21	Skype	Beijing Fashion Week Manager	I C T	Yes	On WeChat, I do not simply get real-time information of my favourite fashion brands but I can interact with them. I daily post my opinions and I share my emotions when I can get my favourite dress or the most-sought-for fashion piece.
SK22	Skype	Beijing Fashion Week	I C		On WeChat I can share my concept of fashion and get feedback from other users. And I have also created my favourite new fashion brands group of followers to create events or to get new ideas to live the brand.
SK23	Skype	Artist			I literally live with WeChat. It is not simply a SM tool, it is the tool to be in touch with brands, interact, understand and know more. But not for purchasing. It can inspire me but I buy in shops where I can feel privileged and pampered.
SK24	Skype	Product Manager	I C	Yes	WeChat gives me the opportunity to post on my favourite brands how I wear it, I can share emotions of how I live a fashion brand and how I live its dresses.

* I = Intimacy; T= Trust; C = Consciousness

4. Data Analysis and Findings

Research in the field (Keller and Berry 2003; Kim and Ko 2010, 2012; Thomas et al 2011) has evidenced the increasing importance and the positive impact of social media for luxury fashion brands for communication and advertising as well as in building a significant relationship with customers. Following their studies, in the last years, academia has started to drive a more specific attention to SM communication, operations, and customer relations with the brand (Dacko, 2017; Demirkan & Spohrer, 2014; Hsiao, 2009). This study has tried to extend Kim and Ko's (2010) model and, more specifically, to see if it can be adapted to the Chinese customer relationship and its SM environment.

Previous studies (Kim & Ko, 2012; Pentina et al., 2018) have provided an in-depth fundamental frame of studies for SMM, customer relationship, and engagement in the context of luxury fashion at a global level; those scholars have enhanced the positive impact of social media on customer relationships with luxury brands despite the contrasting exclusivity nature of luxury. Results from the empirical work evidenced the importance of SM WeChat characteristics in enhancing intimacy, trust, and brand consciousness of customers with luxury fashion brands. Furthermore, empirical evidence showed the specificity of the Chinese customer relationship and in particular with respect to intimacy in relation to the impact of national culture as

evidenced by Atwal and Bryson (2014) as well as by Ismail and Spinelli (2012) with respect to love for brands. Findings are presented as participants' reported perceptions and interpreted associations. Expressions suggesting impact, proof, or causality should not be interpreted as causal evidence.

Data collected during interviews evidenced five characteristics in SM WeChat: entertainment, portability, interaction, word of mouth, and engagement. Kim and Ko (2010) studied diverse characteristics associated with SM properties, and specifically, entertainment, customization, interaction, word of mouth, and trend. Empirical results from this research reported portability and engagement as new highly significant characteristics, but entertainment, interaction, and word of mouth were also positively affecting Chinese consumers' relationship and purchase intention process with SM WeChat.

5. Discussion

Entertainment, previously considered a highly impactful characteristic in SM users' interaction with luxury fashion brands (Kim & Ko, 2010), is part of SM WeChat interaction. Respondents in the interviews enhanced the richness of events, posts that WeChat provides, and the fact that "it cheers up" luxury and fashion lovers. They specifically evidenced the fact that:

□ WeChat is not simply an application; it is a part of any Chinese individual's everyday life. But for those like myself who are passionate about luxury and fashion, it is a must-have! It is rich in fashion events, news, even fashion-related games and fashion outfits simulation or quiz! It is a lot of fun and stuff! (Interview BE4)

And also, that:

□ On WeChat luxury fashion luxury brands do not sell their goods.... you know more about brands and trends and you can even play with outfits before going to a party!! (Interview SH2)

Responses confirmed the role of entertainment in getting more intimate with the brand also in the Chinese context as Kim and Ko (2012) had positively tested in their study. A creative designer highlighted the role that entertainment has in gaining on brand intimacy but also in starting to get followers – and potentially brand customers – engaged with the brand.

□ I use WeChat to promote my brand but I don't communicate too much on products but more on trends, news and giving also advices. Followers ask for advices on what to wear, how to wear,

colours etc; it is a great way to get in touch with them and get them involved. But they do not buy my high-end line on WeChat but in the store (Interview BE2).

Engagement resulted also as one of the strongest positive drivers of customer intimacy with luxury brands: SM WeChat is a highly versatile and comprehensive platform that allows customer to interact with luxury brands activities, not simply by a “like” or an emotion SM activity but a 360° commitment and involvement in increasing a brand promotion and positioning in the Chinese market.

□ It is a great way to have my clients – and myself as well-participating in my concept store life. Thanks to how the app functions, I can do everything. Interact with my clients, invite them to event organised in the concept store, organise activities on WeChat and also a follow-up event in the store. And when I also want to know more about a fashion brand, I ask some WeChat groups some advice: they help me to decide if I want to buy or not from the brand, if they like it I buy it otherwise I do not always buy. (Interview BE3)

As evidenced by a Concept Store Manager as well as the same users, wearing brand products or sharing information on events and fashion shows or chosen products, contribute to the brand diffusion in the Chinese luxury context, engaging themselves in the brand value creation and confirming Pentina et al. (2018) and Dhaoui (2014) specific research on SM and customer engagement in luxury brand value cocreation.

□ I am constantly on WeChat as with my friends, we share information or we share our opinions about fashion style, fashion products, where to buy them and if buying online or not..... And when I post pictures of what I buy, and often my friends then buy the same! (Interview BE1)

Thanks to the frequency and number of posts shared concerning luxury fashion purchase, SM WeChat hold the capacity to positively strengthen customers’ attitudes and in so doing, denying Pollay and Mittal (1993) study that considered the frequency of message associated to luxury consumption as negatively impacting young users’ attitudes towards SM advertising. As a WeChat user highlights:

□ WeChat is unique! It is the main application to have a 360 interaction with brands and live fashion brands!! I am constantly on WeChat as with my friends, we share information, or we share our opinions about fashion style, fashion products, where to buy them and if buying online or not. And when a brand has a new great product or dress, we can also try to see online if it fits or suits us

and our style. And when I post pictures of what I buy, and often my friends then buy the same! (Interview BE5)

In addition, Chia (2010) found that advertising and interpersonal communication are important factors in the arousal of materialistic values among young people. Since SM WeChat allows users to engage with netizens in luxury fashion brands' commercial content, the materialistic perspective proves to be significant. Thus, in the Chinese context, users might see materialism less negatively because of the Chinese cultural and social context and values. Previous literature in the field has evidenced that the birth of the Chinese middle class has been conducive to the emergence of a consumer class with heterogeneous purchasing attitudes (Latham, 2006) characterised by a search of identity and status acquisition in luxury purchase (Rambourg, 2014; Rovai, 2016).

□ *WeChat is the China app and it make us be part of the fashion brand story and life. I can post, text, like my favourite brands and also know more about their new collections and dresses I want to buy. I can also better understand brand values. It is a unique interconnected platform that allows you to discover the fashion and luxury world amongst other things without having to switch from one app to another. Even for payment, you just can do it in a click! (Interview SH4)*

WeChat portability seems to be one of the principal characteristics, allowing an intimate relationship with the brand and encouraging the brand product purchase. SM WeChat portability in its high interactive, participative and interconnected structure, allowing instant messaging, post texting, live events commenting - as well as information, events and activities sharing together with community communication – creates an inclusive and high-quality SM application for unique brand intimacy and relationship cultivation. Users following luxury fashion brands' activity in the highly interconnected WeChat IT environment, indirectly signal their interest in receiving information, respond to information sharing messages, attend online event invitations, or are part of luxury fashion brands' Clubs: interactions that create and intimate relation and finally increase the desire to purchase the product as evidenced during the empirical data collection:

□ *I post, I comment, I express my emotions about my favourite fashion brands on WeChat! And brands share their insights, fashion shows, new products with me!!! I can also get information on the new collections, give my opinion about them and see how to wear those dresses, it is fantastic as if I want, with a simple click I can also buy it. And for national holidays or events I can also make a "red envelope" gift online. (Interview SH3).*

In the past, Greenhill (2012) evidenced how Burberry successfully enhanced its exclusivity by creating a highly effective SM platform to engage customers with the brand. However, the appearance of luxury fashion brands on the Web, was initially limited to the luxury brands' website for sales or for brand promotion. Those websites were not built to promote interaction with the customers but were often simply selling a few products. With respect to the traditional concept of luxury focusing on exclusivity and uniqueness, digitalisation was negatively impacting those attributes and consequently interaction could not be sought for. In the last few years, the Chinese market has testified a revolutionising phenomenon; SMM and, in particular WeChat, have highly contributed to customer/brands interaction:

□ *Thumbs Up for WeChat!!It is part of our life, of our fashion lifestyle!!! We can like, comment, post our new outfits or copy those of top influencers!!But we can also how a brand is developing, changing in its trends and be always the first to be informed about limited editions!! (Interview SK1)*

The development of immediate online communication has proven to be highly significant in engaging relations with the customer. Previous research has evidenced how online evolution provide customers, for some new segments as the Millennial one, an enhanced digital experience, an information-increased product choice and a new luxury consciousness in an ongoing mode, media friendly tool (Pairin & Keng, 2003; Pantano & Verteramo, 2017) as the young customers' segment evidences:

□ *It is great to share my fashion brands experiences on WeChat! People see how I mix and match dresses, my style and I can also see others! I also often post on a fashion brand account my appreciation/like, it makes me feel part of their VIPs. (Interview SK2)*

As previously foreseen by Miller et al. (2009), evidencing a new luxury consciousness, the present empirical research in the Chinese context shows how WeChat also enhances the role played by SM for consumers and community network and joint participation in building a significant customer relationship and positive purchase intention.

In particular, the strategic role of the online community on luxury consumers has been evidenced in relation to the specific focus on the impact of information derived from interpersonal sources on consumer engagement and decision-making processes in comparison to the traditional advertising techniques (Goldsmith & Clark, 2008). Even if diverse types of feedback and information sharing also had and still can have a significant influence on consumers, SMM influencers have been reported to amplify it and increase the relationship with the brand as well as purchase intention, purposely shown in an innovative e-word of mouth – eWOM context (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Jansen et al., 2009; Knoll, 2016).

□ I live on WeChat and I am part of my favourite fashion brands on WeChat! When a brand organises an online fashion show, I participate and send my comments and emotions... Sometimes, other WeChatters or influencers make me change my idea on a brand! (Interview BE1)

In initial academic studies in the relation and purchase intention amongst customer and luxury fashion brands, Mehta (2000) highlighted customers' approach towards advertising and communication is positively associated to purchase intention. It was with Stevenson, Bruner, and Kumar (2000) that it was specifically evidenced how netizens with a less positive approach towards web advertising reported lower rates in purchasing intention. More importantly, social media users with favorable attitudes toward social media advertising are more likely to engage in brand messages and seek information about brands, which in turn leads to their intention for luxury purchases. That is, social media users' behavioral responses to social media advertising such as brand pages are positively related to their purchase intentions toward luxury products. This study has also proven the positive impact of WeChat customers' relation on purchase intention decisions.

Yang (2014) examined the effect of content marketing through We Media in China and found that informative (useful) or entertaining (interesting) content has a positive impact on customers' online interaction propensity and their perception of marketer (Li et al., 2019). Kim and Ko (2010; 2012) evidenced that SMM enhances customer intimacy and engagement with luxury fashion brands and also consumer engagement (Dhaoui, 2014; Pentina et al., 2018). Chinese consumers perceive luxury brand advertising on social media to be conservative, distant, and inactive (Chen & Wang, 2017). In relation to the increasing focus on social media marketing by luxury brands and the importance of the Chinese luxury market evolution for global luxury brands, this article tries to better understand the interaction between SMM and Chinese customers and its impact on the relation with global brands. The Chinese luxury consuming markets has been increasingly digitalized and, as a result, it is extremely important for brand positioning to understand the role of social media in customer relation and purchase intentions.

Furthermore, WeChat's technical specificity of data sharing with eventually only authorised friends or family or otherwise users localised in the neighbourhood are reported to be positive properties of the SM to share more freely individual comments and likes but also in creating groups of luxury fashion brands admirers that can significantly influence purchase intention. Respondents have reported to engage in everyday comments, share news and react to news or luxury fashion events also to share emotions and reactions to newly acquired knowledge for a new brand or for new brand products and also to express their desires and wishes to purchase the luxury fashion brands and products.

H1: As evidenced in the discussion, asking about the motivations that drive respondents to use WeChat - with respect to its characteristics and in contrast with

other Chinese SM platforms – in their relationship with luxury fashion brands, respondents were highly homogeneous in their answers, mainly diversified in the importance given to the motivation and to the aspects in using it. Most SMM tools users replied positively with respect to WeChat as main SM in their relationship with luxury fashion brands. Reliability (in the luxury fashion brand information provided), portability and immediateness (in the use), events and activities (shared by luxury fashion brands) interactivity, eWOM were considered the main SM characteristics that were motivating users to choose WeChat with respect to other SM platforms and tools specific to the Chinese environment.

They reported interacting daily with luxury fashion brands through WeChat in a textual format or by sharing information to exchange information or mention their views opinions, encouraged also by the fact that their contributions and reactions are also visible to other SM to other users. For this study, this interaction through WeChat is driven by the motivation to (a) indicate the consumer's relationship with the brand and (b) develop with the brand an in-depth intimacy through contribution to the products or events modification. In this context the relation with luxury fashion brands is seen in the desire for closeness with the brand that WeChat users are developing and that previous literature (Sternberg, 1996; Kim & Ko, 2010) evidenced at a general level. Respondents motivated by a closer relationship with the brand showed that they needed to enhance their feedback about the brand and their products, posts, and events; in the same way, they were also hoping for a response from the brand or the brand-associated influencers. Users, motivated by a desire to acquire increased knowledge and get closer to the essence of the brand, appreciated WeChat's interactive relationship with the brand and responses, reposts, or positive feedback expressed by the brand in the posts. Brand Testimonials or influencers were also positively considered in the process and in relation.

H2: In previous literature, intimacy and closeness with the brand were found to be mainly positively affected by entertainment and by word of mouth, and it was evidenced that entertainment, customization, and trend were sufficiently supporting customers' expectations and relations with luxury fashion brands (Kim & Ko, 2010; Muntinga et al., 2011). The ongoing changing Chinese customers (Ngai & Cho, 2012) responding to this study, showed to be actively participating in the luxury fashion brands' life on WeChat and to be positively impressed by the daily intimacy they can build on the brand page, as well as the participation in the events that luxury fashion brands organise and broadcast on WeChat. Their feedback and comments appeared to be not only directed towards the brand itself but seemed to be also reactions to previous comments of other users, publicly and collectively acknowledging closeness as well as knowledge that they may have – or not - of the brand, which is particularly relevant in the collectivist “new bourgeoisie” and status-searching Chinese luxury consumer context. This motivation certainly deserves further research with respect to its role as a cultural antecedent in online consumer behaviours. Chinese cultural values and norms and the “Chineseness” have been previously identified as emerging elements impacting Chinese luxury fashion brands relationship (Rambourg, 2015) with Chinese customers given the latter “digitalisation” trends (Rovai, 2018) and it was extensively evidenced the different

conceptualisation of trust and intimacy between eastern and western cultures (Hofstede, 1998). However, both intimacy and specifically in the Chinese digital context have not been previously responses. “WeChat encourages information and emotions sharing!!Its portability enables a participative relation with the brand” indicates J.Kong, CEO and Founder of Whisptopia, a high-end athletleisure Chinese brand, popular amongst WeChat “addicted” respondents. She also evidenced the daily emotional engagement, enabled by WeChat with luxury brands, contributing to intimacy and trust in the brand. She also highlighted the positive impact of influencers on brand trust. She also enhanced how, according to her experience, luxury fashion brands’ WeChat pages as well as events – pop-up advertisements, testimonials, or influencers’ profile pages - appear to be a significant tool to increase brand intimacy, trust, and attachment, facilitating the relationship with the brand and users’ purchase intention

H3: The importance of influencers in the luxury fashion brand customer relationship (De Veirman et al., 2017), as well as trust in influencers, with consequent less resistance to the information and message, had already been evidenced by previous research (De Vries et al., 2012). However, the highly diversified Chinese luxury consumer market, where luxury fashion brand consciousness is still uneven and challenging for luxury fashion brands, respondents’ results showing their search in WeChat influencers pages for increased information -and particularly advice - on luxury fashion brands’ new trends and collections, clearly evidenced the significant role of the SM in facilitating brand consciousness. Influencers, through WeChat interaction with respondents, are reported to have a significant role in developing an interactive relationship with customers to enhance the knowledge and consciousness of a specific luxury fashion brand.

A few users enhanced that the opportunity to acquire more brand and product consciousness and knowledge intensifies their interest in the brand and emotional intention to be closer to the brand and purchase of its products. In this context, the users’ relation with the brand appears to be enhanced by the more intense emotional component as a reaction to the brand and brand influencers’ news, which can also stimulate others’ positive reactions, positively impacting the brand followers’ activity and consciousness. Previous research has enhanced the increasing focus of luxury fashion brands to encourage their online followers to share their comments, posts, and texts (Peters et al., 2013), and the sample of respondents to this study has shown the potential impact on luxury fashion brands, thanks to the resulting impact on purchase intention. Algorythm Concept Store Founder and GM clearly indicated the limited use of WeChat for online direct purchase of luxury fashion products by evidencing the positive significant influence of information sharing and acquisition on purchase intention, but not on purchase finalisation “If I want to know more about a brand and its product, I rely on WeChat. But I only buy affordable luxury through WeChat or services, I want to see, touch, and experience luxury fashion products purchase!”.

The results of this study, based on the initial Kim and Ko (2010) model, support the SM WeChat context link between luxury fashion brand intimacy, trust, and

consciousness and customers in the Chinese context. The findings are consistent with previous studies on customer relations and purchase intention in SMM and provide further insight and extend the current model for SM in the Chinese context. Data collected from the respondents evidenced the significant relationship between customer relationship and purchasing intention; in particular, it enhanced the impact of the three customer relationship characteristics of intimacy, trust and consciousness on purchase intention. The role of influencers on enhancing customer relationship with luxury fashion brands as well as brand consciousness extended previous models in the field (Kim & Ko, 2010). The study's findings should be understood as exploratory and context-dependent, rather than as evidence of causal correlations between social media marketing activity and customer behaviour. Instead of establishing immediate effects, the empirical data shows how participants saw and described the function of WeChat in shaping connections with luxury companies through experiences related to intimacy, trust, engagement, and brand consciousness. These findings imply that, in the specific Chinese luxury milieu studied, social media may serve as a relational and meaning-making environment rather than a promotional communication medium. From a theoretical standpoint, this study adds to the literature by extending past social media marketing frameworks through a qualitative and culturally contextualized knowledge of luxury brand interactions.

6. Implications

This article has tried to provide a first understanding of the influence of luxury fashion brands' SM WeChat on customer relationships and purchase intention. As an initial response to the call for more qualitative research in social media marketing studies (Belk, 2017), an exploratory qualitative methodological approach was chosen. With respect to the need to focus on an appropriate unit of analysis, it was decided to follow the convenience sampling methodological approach, given that the research objective is the definition and the identification of characteristics associated with a phenomenon (Miles et al. 2014). Research questions and consequent hypotheses were aligned to the objective of the research, and tentative conclusions and limitations were reached following the specific process defined in the methodological section. Research findings show that luxury fashion brands' SM WeChat is positively impacting new marketing trends. Given the objectives of the study, the resulting implications are as follows.

Luxury fashion brands' SM WeChat comprises five characteristics specifically evidenced during the interviews by respondents: entertainment, portability, interaction, word of mouth, and engagement. With respect to the previous characteristics shown by Kim and Ko's (2010) study, it shows additional characteristics such as portability and engagement, which had not been mentioned in previous studies. Responses evidenced that the Chinese luxury environment is defined by specific characteristics proper to its Chinese SM interaction with the customers. With respect to the specific SM WeChat influence on customer impact and purchase intention, portability – in the WeChat technical system supporting daily

activities with luxury brands, influencers and community - interaction – instant interaction during events such as fashion shows or testimonials’ live fashion experiences through text messaging, likes, information sharing - had a significant influence on intimacy thanks to the closeness to the brand activities and to influencers daily life experiences. Groups of admirers also enhanced trust in luxury fashion brands, in particular, the shared emotional reactions and comments shared and reposted with respect to a specific brand or its products. Entertainment and word of mouth in the relationship with influencers revealed to have a highly significant positive influence on luxury consumers’ consciousness towards fashion brands, thanks to events or information as well as advice sharing by trustable influencers or trustable WeChat community members. While portability, interaction, entertainment and word of mouth were reported to have a positive influence on the customer relationship with luxury fashion brands, it is also engagement, interaction, and word of mouth that mainly influence intention to purchase. Research has shown how the opportunity to acquire more brand and products consciousness and knowledge intensifies customers’ interest in the brand, and emotional intention to be closer but also to purchase the products. As noted, most of characteristics show a significant impact on customer relations and intention to purchase with a diversity in the objective or the activity used in WeChat media. If every characteristic allows information or emotions sharing as well as community interaction and engagement with the specific luxury brand for the customer, it is in the trust and consciousness of the luxury fashion brands that ultimately are mentioned to be decisive in purchase intention.

In a fast-growing but also increasingly demanding and complex Chinese luxury consumer market, highly diversified in its brand consciousness but highly harmonised in SM diffusion in particular amongst the new luxury consumer segments, luxury fashion brands engaging in a locally-based SMM– in the type of SM tools used and, in its engagement, and interactive activities – strategy can find a key to successfully enter but also to acquire a sustainable positioning in unharmonized Chinese market.

As enhanced by Chu et al. (2013), because of the fast-growing adoption of luxury goods advertising in social media, more empirical research is required to examine young customers’ behaviours, attitudes and responses to SM advertising. While in Western countries they have found common non-geographical bounded platforms, the situation has appeared different in China, due to the institutional barriers to the use of those platforms in the local market and the presence of different ones. With the increasing presence and critical importance of the millennial segment in the Chinese consumer market, local SMM have provided luxury brands a privileged way to engage the millennial luxury segment and to strengthen the relationship with the brand that requires more in-depth understanding.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study is based on original data gathered between January and July/August 2018. Despite the limitation related to the fact that the dataset was assembled several years before the article's publication, those data serve as a valuable pre-pandemic baseline, documenting Chinese luxury consumers' social media activity and brand interactions before the unprecedented disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, inflation, and the subsequent transformation of the digital ecosystem. As such, the findings reflect customers' more organic engagement with luxury goods in a stable market context, free from the extraordinary conditions that have since altered digital consumption patterns.

In this way, the current study provides a vital historical baseline for future research to evaluate the path of luxury consumer behaviour in China's fast changing social media environment. The psychological mechanisms investigated in this study—especially trust, intimacy, and brand consciousness—are rooted in established consumer behaviour and relationship marketing theories, even as digital platforms, algorithms, and application interfaces change. Likewise, the newly identified dimensions of mobility and engagement suggest broader behavioural and experiential aspects of theoretical value beyond the specific technological features of social media platforms at any given moment. As such, the fundamental theoretical connections explored in this paper remain theoretically valid despite the changing technological environment.

At the same time, it is observed that China's social media ecosystem and luxury market have advanced substantially since 2018. The rise of AI-powered personalization, private-domain marketing, and altering customer expectations may have influenced the relative importance and presentation of some of the observed connections. Future research should replicate and extend the suggested framework with more recent information to investigate the stability of these mechanisms over time and expose potential adjustments in consumer behaviour. Future research will have to go more in-depth in the use of Chinese SM WeChat with respect to diverse luxury and non-luxury sectors to test the appropriateness of the model to other business sectors or also eastern geographical markets.

In addition, the use of convenience sampling decreases the findings' transferability outside the study contributors. The sample was primarily female and concentrated on a specific age range, which may not have fully analysed disparities between demographic groups. Participants were only recruited from Beijing and Shanghai, which limits the findings' application to consumers in different geographical and cultural situations as in also more rural areas of China. Finally, data were gathered using both face-to-face and online interviews. Although a uniform semi-structured technique was used across all interview formats, variations in communication dynamics may have influenced participants' responses. Forthcoming studies could use more varied and representative samples, expand geographical coverage, and look into the potential impact of interview format on qualitative findings.

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