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# Understanding the effects of gratifications on the continuance intention to use WeChat in China: A perspective on uses and gratifications

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## ABSTRACT

Prior studies have shown that gratifications exert significant effects on the sustained use of an information system by individuals. However, the roles of different gratifications vary in predicting continuance usage in different research contexts. Also, less attention has been paid to how gratifications affect the continuance intention to use WeChat. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of different gratifications on the continuance intention to use WeChat in China. Based on the uses and gratifications theory, a theoretical model is developed, which identifies four types of gratification: hedonic gratification, social gratification, utilitarian gratification and technology gratification. Data were collected via a questionnaire survey from 297 WeChat users in China, and further analyzed using PLS-SEM. The results show that, technology gratification (media appeal) has the greatest effect on the continuance intention to use WeChat, followed by hedonic gratification (perceived enjoyment) and utilitarian gratification (information sharing).

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, social media like WeChat have gained increasing popularity and deeply changed people's lives (Gan & Wang, 2015). WeChat (Wéixìn or "微信" in Chinese), launched in 2011 by Tencent, offers multiple services to individuals and organizations, including communication services via text messages and voices as well as social networking services (SNS). The latest report issued by Tencent (2016a, p. 2016) shows that, by the end of the first quarter of 2017, the number of monthly active WeChat users has reached 938 million. Despite its huge user base and the fast-growing market, the service provider (i.e. Tencent) still faces intense competition to retain its users over the long-term due to the availability of other competitors offering similar services in the Chinese market, such as Momo and Ali Wangwang (CNNIC, 2016; Gan, 2016). As Bhattacharjee (2001) stated, attracting users' initial adoption and use is only the first step in achieving information system (IS) success; retaining their customers is the most vital aspect. Thus, it is meaningful to explore the motivations driving the continued usage

of WeChat.

In the literature, previous studies have employed different theories to investigate IS continuance, such as expectation-confirmation theory (ECT) (Bhattacharjee, 2001), IS success model (DeLone & McLean, 1992) and flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). Prior research has revealed different factors that affect IS continuance, such as satisfaction, enjoyment, perceived user base, habit and emotion (e.g., Basak & Calisir, 2015; Chaouali, 2016; Gan & Li, 2015). Recently, the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) in the field of media research has attracted the attention of IS scholars. Some researchers have attempted to explain social media use from the perspective of uses and gratifications (e.g., Gallego, Bueno, & Noyes, 2016; Hsu, Tien, Lin, & Chang, 2015; Li, Liu, Xu, Heikkilä, & van der Heijden, 2015). Extant research has shown that gratifications have significant impacts on IS users' sustained use; however, the roles of different gratifications vary in predicting the sustained use of an IS in different research contexts. In addition, though prior research has investigated individuals' use of WeChat, there is a lack of understanding on how the gratifications impact the continuance intention of individuals to use WeChat. Specifically, 1) what gratifications affect the continuance intention of WeChat users; 2) to

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what extent do different gratifications influence the continuance intention of WeChat users?

To address the above research questions, this study employs U&G theory as the research framework and adopts a deductive-driven approach to examine individuals' continuance intention to use WeChat in China. A theoretical model was proposed based on the U&G theory, and empirically tested with 297 valid data collected from WeChat users in China. In doing so, this research sheds light on strengthening the roles of different gratifications in affecting IS users' continuance behavior in the research context of social media. Also, an investigation of factors that construct the gratifications helps understand the dimensions of gratifications in different IS research contexts. Furthermore, this study makes practical contributions concerning the retention of existing social media users.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section provides the theoretical background. The research model and hypotheses are then developed in Section 3. Section 4 describes the research methodology, followed by data analysis in Section 5. Section 6 discusses the results, and Section 7 concludes the paper with a focus on the theoretical and practical implications as well as the research limitations.

## 2. Theoretical background

First developed in radio communication research, U&G theory has been widely used in the research field of mass communication. It aims to identify the social and psychological motives that drive individuals' use of a particular media (Leung & Wei, 2000), focusing on why individuals choose one media over other alternatives in order to gratify a variety of needs (Katz et al., 1974). According to the U&G theory, individuals are active in choosing media to meet their requirements. U&G theory provides a nomological research framework without a predefined set of constructs (Li et al., 2015).

In the literature, U&G theory has been widely applied in traditional media research as well as in research regarding the Internet. Notable examples include newspaper (Elliott & Rosenberg, 1987), cell phone (Leung & Wei, 2000), television (Babrow, 1987), e-mail (Dimmick, Kline, & Stafford, 2000; Ku, Chu, & Tseng, 2013), instant messaging (Lo & Leung, 2009) and the Internet (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004). Recently, a growing number of IS studies have adopted U&G theory to examine user behavior in the context of social media, such as microblogging (Gan & Wang, 2015), Twitter (Coursaris, Jieun, Van, & Younghwa, 2013), Facebook (Hsu et al., 2015; Malik, Dhir, & Nieminen, 2016), social network games (Li et al., 2015) and SNS (Chaouali, 2016; Ku et al., 2013).

Prior studies have categorized the gratifications gained when using different media. For example, Venkatesh and Brown (2001)

found that personal computer adoption at home is motivated by hedonic gratification (fun), utilitarian gratification (utility) and social gratification (status). In recent years, researchers have also identified different types of gratifications associated with using a variety of social media. A study by Xu, Ryan, Prybutok, and Wen (2012) revealed hedonic gratification (leisure and affection) and utilitarian gratification (immediate access and coordination) were gained when using SNS. Li et al. (2015) noted utilitarian gratification (achievement), social gratification (social presence and social interaction) and hedonic gratification (fantasy, escapism and enjoyment) were obtained from social network gaming. Another study by Liu, Cheung, and Lee (2016) found content gratification (information sharing, self-documentation, and self-expression) and technology gratification (convenience, media appeal and social presence) were derived from the use of microblogging. Table 1 summarizes the recent related studies which applied U&G theory to explore the use of different media.

In summary, U&G theory has been applied to identify how individual users use media in different contexts. Based on the prior findings, this study employs U&G theory as the theoretical background to investigate the continuance intention to use WeChat in China. First, U&G theory helps to understand media use on the individual level; second, U&G theory is appropriate for studying motives in the context of IS use (Li et al., 2015). Individuals choose to use WeChat to fulfill their various needs voluntarily. Thus, U&G theory is suitable for explaining whether the gratifications obtained from individuals' prior use of WeChat determines their continuance intention to use WeChat and what the different roles of the specific gratifications are in predicting individuals' sustained use of WeChat. Building on U&G theory, this study proposes that the gratifications obtained in prior WeChat use will influence individuals' continuance intention; and four gratifications are suggested for exploring the continuance intention to use WeChat: utilitarian gratification, social gratification, hedonic gratification and technology gratification.

## 3. Research model and hypotheses

### 3.1. Research model

The theoretical model is depicted in Fig. 1. This study identifies four types of gratification: hedonic gratification (perceived enjoyment and passing time), social gratification (social interaction and social presence), utilitarian gratification (self-presentation, information documentation and information sharing) and technology gratification (media appeal). Constructs derived from various theories, such as motivation theories and communication theory, are considered in the research model in order to capture the different

**Table 1**  
Summary of the related studies.

U&G Typology	Media	Study
Hedonic gratification: fun Utilitarian gratification: utility Social gratification: status	Personal computer	Venkatesh and Brown (2001)
Process gratification: search engines, resources, searching, technology, surfing, and Internet websites Content gratification: information, education, knowledge, learning and research Social gratification: chatting, friends, interaction and people	Internet	Stafford et al. (2004)
Utilitarian gratification: immediate access and coordination Hedonic gratification: affection and leisure	SNS	Xu et al. (2012)
Utilitarian gratification: achievement Social gratification: social presence and social interaction Hedonic gratification: fantasy, escapism and enjoyment	Social network game	Li et al. (2015)
Content gratification: information sharing, self-documentation, and self-expression Technology gratification: convenience, media appeal and social presence	Microblogging	Liu et al. (2016)

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