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## 'Poor' user experience may be contextual

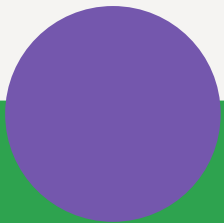
In our [previous report](#), we analysed how high mobile penetration has established strong foundations for mobile-first markets in China and Southeast Asia. This has led to the advent of superapps, where you can perform a wide range of functions, all without leaving the app. Chinese superapps like WeChat and Alipay pioneered this trend, establishing strong ecosystems, creating mini-programmes and welcoming integrations with third parties.

With this full suite of functionalities, the interfaces of Chinese superapps are often perceived as complex and cluttered to the Western eye. Animated banners call for the user's attention everywhere. First-time users are easily confused by which button to use or where to find the information needed. Critics might say that these apps were poorly designed, gaudy and loud.

Before mislabelling this as "poor user experience", it's worth considering that different cultures and social nuances are manifested in the design of digital experiences. At the same time, Chinese consumers' interactions and expectations of digital services are being shaped as they spend more and more time on the most popular apps.

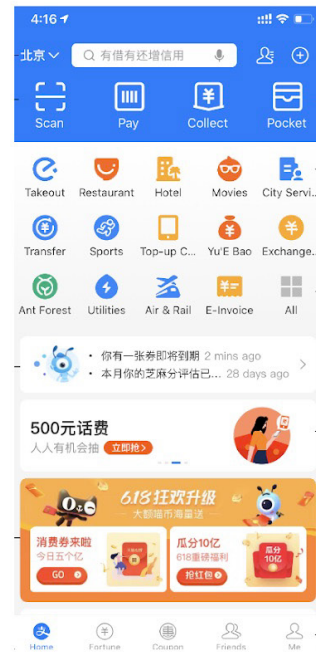
While many Western apps place a large emphasis on usability, superapp users are choosing eventual learnability, forgoing minimalism and immediate intuition for high-powered function.

In this report, we explore Chinese superapps, mother of the superapp trend, and outline four experience principles we have observed as well as how user behavior patterns on these apps are analogous to their physical interactions and culture.



# The homepage: a gateway to endless functions

Alipay, Tmall, JD, Taobao and Meituan all have one thing in common. The moment you launch the app a busy interface and multiple icons call for your attention. To a foreign user, this can be confusing and overwhelming. However, these superapps have such strong market dominance in China that Chinese users are accustomed to these homescreens and expect access to multiple functions from here.



**Alipay**  
(Online Payment Platform)



**Taobao**  
(E commerce site)

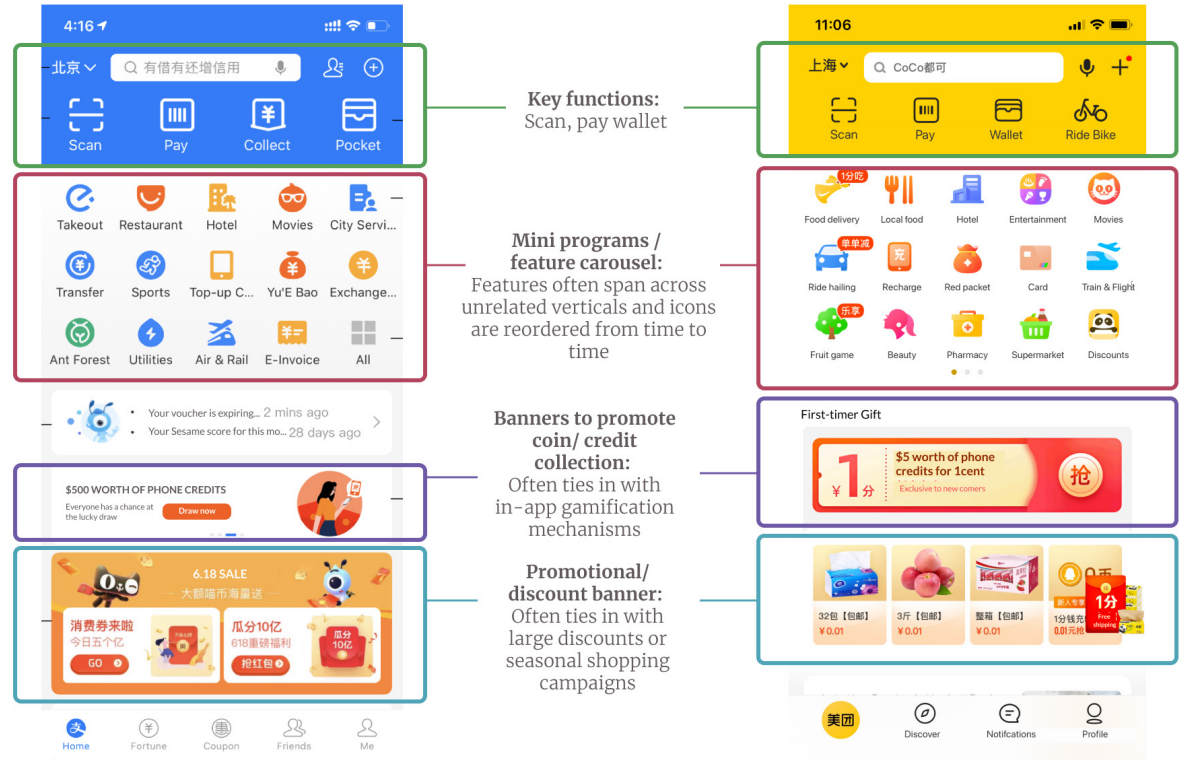


**Meituan**  
(Shopping platform for retail services)

# Reason: A one-stop-shop to multiple functions

To understand why superapp homescreens seem cluttered, we need to understand how superapps like WeChat and AliPay work. Unlike apps in the Western world, which often have a dedicated use case (e.g. WhatsApp for messaging, Facebook for social media, Google Maps for navigation etc.), Chinese superapps house a variety of mini apps (also known as “Mini Programmes”), catering to a wide range of needs and tasks in a user’s daily life.

As such, the homescreen is designed as an entry point to different key services which may be seemingly unrelated, but all exist within one superapp ecosystem.



Alipay

Meituan



## Deeper observations: A design pattern which Chinese users are accustomed to

Users are able to smoothly and confidently navigate through these apps, and the network of functions, as they are a structure common to most superapps. Across superapps the homepage is often a combination of modular functional components that can be reordered based on seasonal campaigns and marketing needs.

Common modules include feature carousels, notifications, banners that promote gifts and credits, and other promotional banners. This page structure condenses key features into a single glance, making the homescreen of a superapp an effective one-stop shop offering quick and easy access to the services within the app.

Even though the components and icons placed in close proximity on the homepage are seemingly unrelated, making it potentially difficult for a first time user to find specific functions, users tend to get accustomed to this consistent structure after extended use. Meaning, users quickly become confident enough to utilise the large range of features packed within the app. This design pattern becomes a guiding mental model when people use other superapps.

This shows that when creating such feature-packed superapps, there is a focus on functionality and utility, forgoing initial usability for eventual learnability. However, we believe that usability and learnability are not exclusive concepts. As these apps evolve a balance can be struck between usability and diverse functionality to improve experience.

# No more typing

Chinese apps tend to include more call-to-actions offering immediacy of action whilst requiring users to type less. Unlike their Western counterparts, search behavior amongst Chinese users does not always begin with typing words into the search bar. Instead, users are likely to click into the category cards and explore trending search keywords or suggested search keywords as a first step.

Chinese apps have built strong algorithms to generate predictive search suggestions based on past search behavior, as well as trending searches within user communities. When the user taps on the search bar, it's not surprising to see a pre-filled suggested search topic. These suggestions not only guide users' search paths, but also prevent frustrations that may occur with using the wrong search phrases or expressions. In addition to predictive search functions, it's also common to see search bars that support voice inputs.

Suggested search keyword



Image search

Recent searches:  
(Not just products, but merchants as well)

Discover / Suggested searches:  
based on what the app thinks you'd be interested in

Top searches for today

Topical/ Seasonal searches:  
Chinese new year snacks and drinks

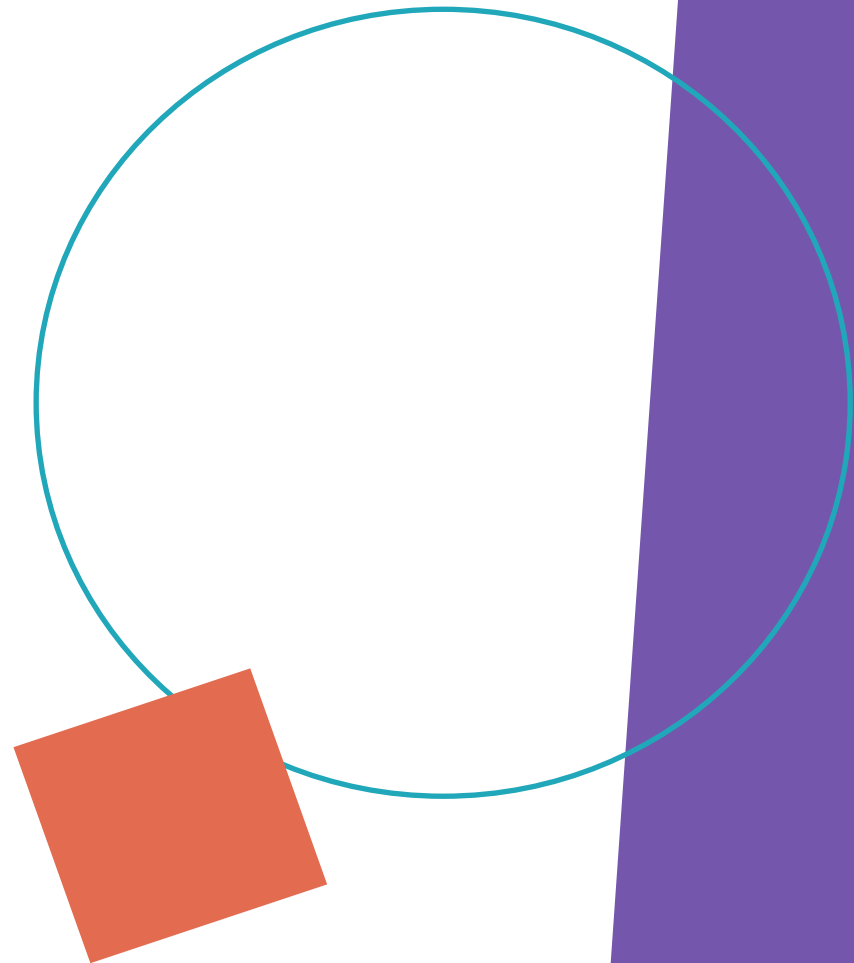
Voice search

Taobao

## Reason: The complex nature of Chinese language

One of the main reasons why text input is minimal is because there are multiple ways to express the same meaning in Chinese language. For example, in Baidu, there are over 200 character combinations to express the phrase “weather forecast”. With strong suggested search prompts, users don’t have to try multiple expressions to get the information they need. This also helps them to learn the correct search keywords or phrases for future use.

Furthermore, with the large number of dialects spoken in China, voice search is preferred over text inputs. This is because the user does not have to worry about writing the wrong character or spelling the wrong pinyin (the romanisation of Mandarin characters) while using a foreign alphabet keyboard which they may not be familiar with.

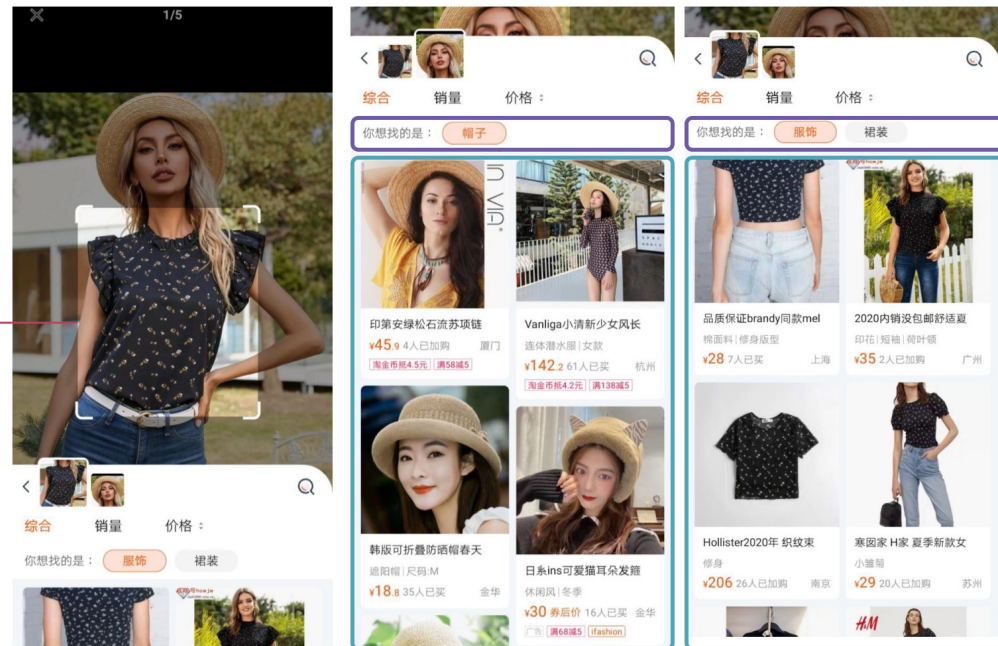




# Deeper observations: Image searches

Taobao's image search function takes search to another level with its ability to find products that are almost identical to the image submitted, down to the details such as prints and colours. In addition, it uses tags to inform users of the product category. The ease and high accuracy of image search allows users to enjoy their online experience more, meaning they can spend more time shopping, hence increasing the likelihood of conversion.

**Image search:** Taobao's image search is able to auto-detect products in the image user submitted. It also allows user to select another product in the image (in this case, the hat).



Suggested product categories

Search results are highly similar to the ones detected in the image.

# Rich media rules

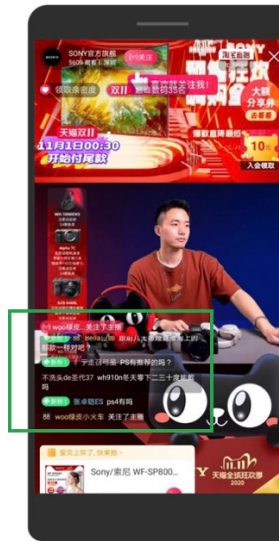
Comparing Taobao with Amazon shows that on Taobao rich media, such as videos, is the main way to communicate information. This is evidenced by as many as three videos appearing on a typical product description page. Auto-play videos are also often the first piece of content on the page. Even reviews are peppered with videos to show how the product works while in use. On the contrary, Amazon's product page is text-heavy with the occasional marketing image, and review submissions are usually just text or images. From as early as 2016, Taobao President Jiang Fan had shared his [vision](#) that

“in the future, 90 per cent of content on Taobao will be videos.”

Beyond the regular videos, short clips of 10–20s have become commonplace, growing faster than regular video platforms such as Tencent Video and Youku. The overnight success of video-sharing apps such as Douyin (the version of TikTok used throughout China) and Kuaishou (a close rival of Douyin) has sparked the likes of WeChat and Taobao to add short video features onto their platforms.



This icon indicates that there is a Taobao Live livestream by the merchant at the moment.



Users can watch the livestream to understand what the products actually look like, how to operate them and use different features. In addition, they can directly ask questions in the live chat.



Product video auto-plays once user enters the product page.



Product video minimizes to a smaller window and continues to play in the background as user scrolls down for product details.



## Reason: A one-stop-shop to multiple functions

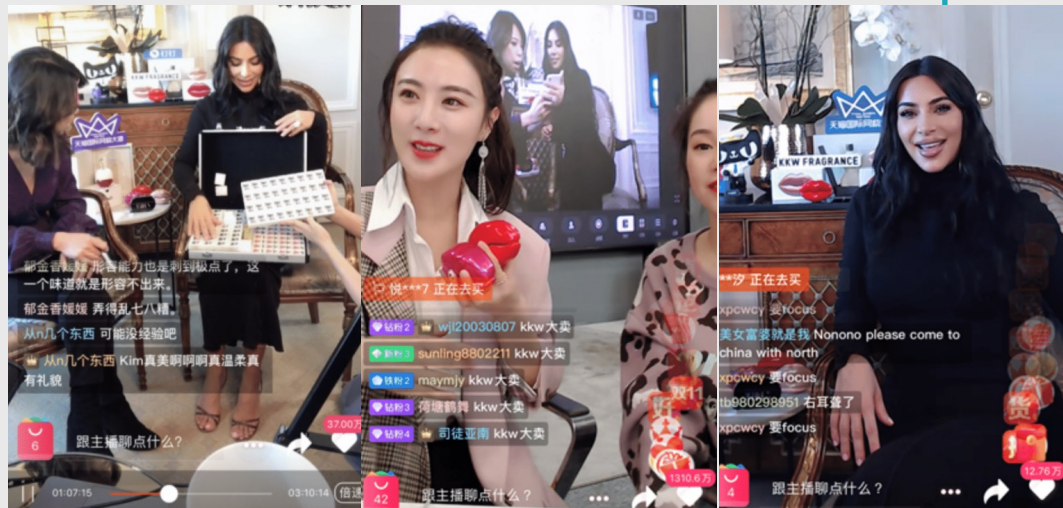
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## Deeper observations: Live streams and Key Opinion Leaders

While livestreaming started prior to 2020, it's worth noting that it only took off during Covid lockdowns. Limited to their homes, live-streams became a new form of entertainment for consumers, allowing them to shop and discover new products while interacting with the host. With a high degree of transparency and interaction, where the audience could request to view certain colours and sizes and even ask the host to try on certain products, live-streams are seen as a trusted source of information.



# The grand social exchange

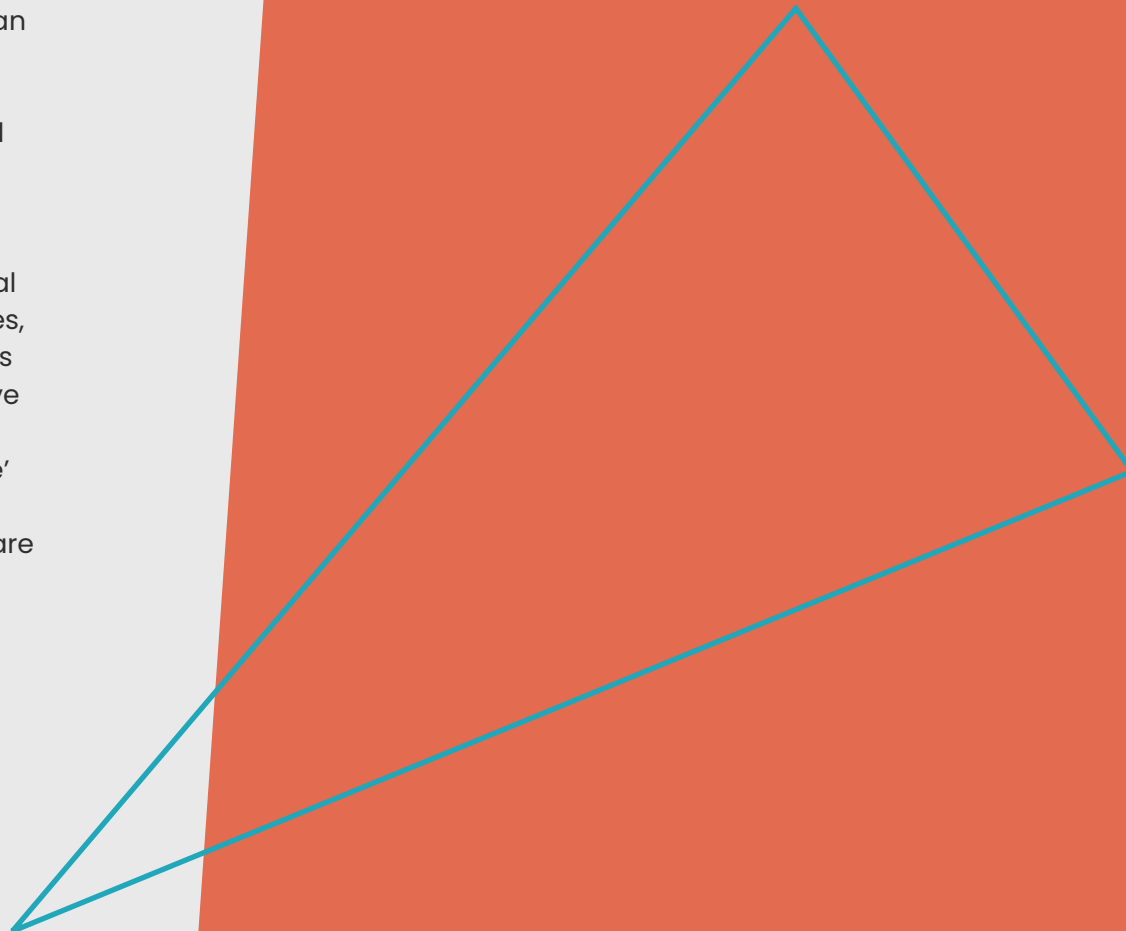
Opportunities for social exchanges are more commonly found within Chinese apps than Western apps. Beyond the common features such as sharing about your day on WeChat Moments, Chinese apps also have other features such as sending digital red packets, viewing “people nearby” with location sharing features and interacting and exchanging ‘gifts’ with merchants and influencers on live-streams.

Such depth of social exchanges is not as common in Western apps, as user privacy and confidentiality are valued a lot more, and hence restraints and norms discourage these forms of social interactions.

## Reason: Guanxi – A cultural concept of relationship building

One of the fundamental concepts in Chinese culture is that of guanxi (literally translated to “relationship”). Guanxi is a set of beliefs in building relationships and getting things done based on trust, mutual obligations and exchanging favours with others. Often it’s given more importance than cold, hard, codified rules. This could explain why Chinese consumers were quick to gift digital red packets and share good deals within their social circles.

Similarly, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) constantly interact with their user-base on a highly personal level (e.g. addressing users by their profile names, answering specific questions or requests such as trying on a specific colour, giving honest negative reviews) in order to establish an authentic relationship, build trust, and ultimately ‘influence’ shopping decisions. With a high degree of transparency and interaction KOL live-streams are seen as a trusted source of information.



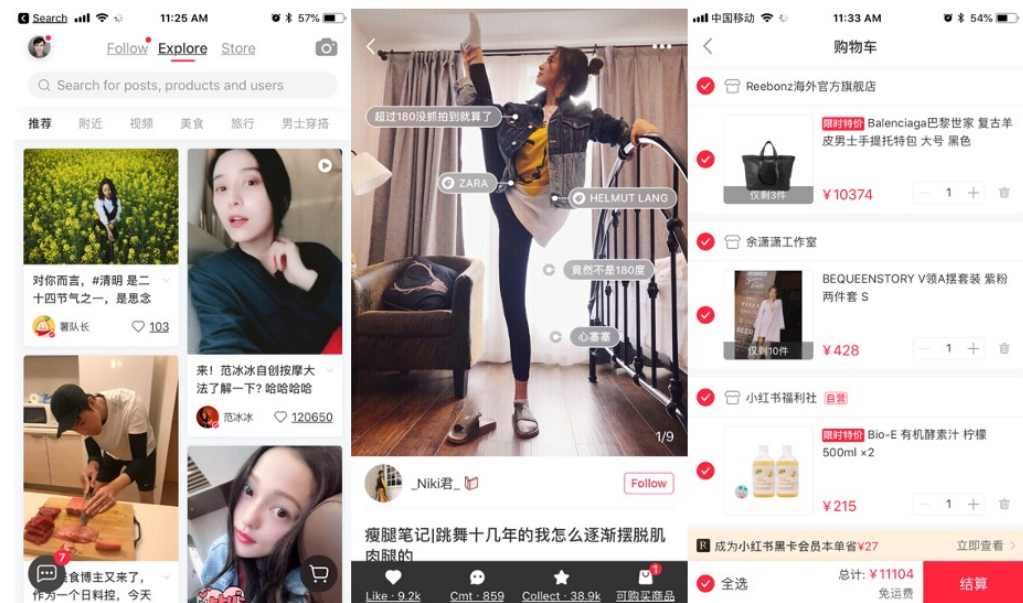


## Deeper observations: Social proof and enhanced transparency in social- commerce

The strong cultural fundamentals rooted in guanxi may also explain the success of a new wave of Chinese social-commerce apps, which make use of social proofing to build trust within user communities. These include the likes of Pinduoduo (an e-commerce platform for group purchases aggregated across different users) and Xiaohongshu (a word-of-mouth marketing platform where consumers can discover and buy products based on user-generated content; think Instagram-Pinterest-Amazon hybrid), which take advantage of Chinese consumers' heavy reliance on reviews and recommendations for validation before purchase. This shows that beyond KOLs, users also get reviews and recommendations from their own social circle or other users similar to them when purchasing.

The success of social commerce in Asia can be explained by research on consumer behavior, which has shown that Asian shoppers were more likely to buy something if their friends liked it as well - with 56% of consumers valuing recommendations from interest circles. As compared to marketing materials or sponsored reviews, user-generated content like reviews and

recommendations are deemed as authentic and trustworthy. This increases customer confidence and their belief that the recommended products will be relevant to their needs.



Socialise & interact

Browse

Shop

## Deeper observations: Building a relationship through virtual gifting

Another common example of social exchanges in the Chinese apps is the exchange of virtual gifts, specifically red packets. While traditionally there are certain rules about when and to whom red packets could be given out to, the apps have gamified the interaction. For example, users can send red packets to a group of friends but the amount is split randomly, akin to a lottery.

Other examples are “voice-locked red packets” and “puzzle-locked red packets”. These create novel ways for users to interact with their friends and relatives, while sending a little gift. Businesses have also made use of the red packets to allow users to send red packets of credits or points (e.g. Starbucks points). In addition, users are also able to send red packets to strangers (e.g. a survey participant, or someone who shared your blog post), replacing the business-like formality of payments with feelings of gratitude and acts of exchanging favours.





# 'Good' design isn't universal

UX design principles are not universal. What works in one market may not work in another, and what is considered "good design" in one may not be so in another.

Chinese culture and social nuances are manifested in the design of their digital experiences. At the same time, Chinese consumers' expectations of digital services are also constantly being shaped by their habitual interactions with the most popular apps.

It's important for businesses to understand the Chinese consumers' habits, expectations and mental models, and to localise your digital offerings to cater to the Chinese consumers.

The next time you are designing something for the Chinese market, keep in mind the following four key principles:

- 1** Structure the homepage as a gateway for multiple functions
- 2** Minimise text input searches
- 3** Use rich media more than text or static images
- 4** Create opportunities for social exchange