

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.48009/3\\_iis\\_2026\\_122](https://doi.org/10.48009/3_iis_2026_122)

## When leaving is like moving house: Thresholds, migration, and Super-App discontinuation in WeChat

**Christian Wagner**, *City University of Hong Kong*, [c.wagner@cityu.edu.hk](mailto:c.wagner@cityu.edu.hk)

**Xiaobo Ke**, *The Education University of Hong Kong*, [bxk@eduhk.hk](mailto:bxk@eduhk.hk)

**Qitian Song**, *City University of Hong Kong*, [qitiasong2-c@my.cityu.edu.hk](mailto:qitiasong2-c@my.cityu.edu.hk)

### Abstract

Super-apps such as WeChat pose a distinctive challenge for information systems research because discontinuation may be more difficult than in single-purpose systems. When messaging, payment, service access, and routine coordination are integrated within one platform, leaving may involve more than dissatisfaction or preference change. This study examines how users imagine discontinuation in the mature super-app environment of WeChat. Drawing on fourteen semi-structured interviews with young Chinese users and using constructivist grounded theory, the article develops the Super-App Lock-in Discontinuation Model (SALDiM). The analysis shows that discontinuation is rarely imagined as a simple switch. Instead, users often describe exit as a thresholded and staged process in which some functions appear movable while others remain difficult to disentangle from everyday life. The findings indicate that discontinuation is shaped not only by attitudes toward the platform, but by the technical integration of communication, payment, notifications, and service access, as well as by the social coordination already organized through those arrangements. The greatest difficulty is therefore not merely finding substitutes for isolated features, but reorganizing routines and relationships outside an established platform ecology. By recasting super-app discontinuation as the attempted unbundling of a socially embedded and technically integrated infrastructure, this study extends IS research on platform lock-in, discontinuation, and user agency in highly integrated digital environments.

**Keywords:** super-app discontinuation; WeChat; platform lock-in; sociotechnical infrastructure; constructivist grounded theory

### Introduction

Super-apps have become one of the most consequential forms of digital platform organization in contemporary information systems (IS) (Loh et al., 2025). Super-apps combine multiple services within one technical environment, often including messaging, payment, commerce, transportation, content, and a growing range of routine service functions (Steinberg, 2020). With their many integrated services, these apps may begin to operate less like an individual application and more like a coordinating layer for everyday activity. From an IS perspective, this raises a basic question: when a platform becomes deeply integrated into daily routines, what does it mean for a user to leave it? The question matters as the logic of super-apps extends beyond convenience towards technical integration: the same account, interface, payment layer, notification system, and service environment can be reused across many domains of action (Júnior et al., 2024). Communication, transaction, information access, and coordination then become increasingly

interoperable and comparatively cumbersome across other multiple platforms. Retention, then, may not depend solely on satisfaction with any single function. It may also depend on whether the platform has become the most efficient way to keep many parts of everyday life connected.

This creates a theoretical challenge for research on technology discontinuation. IS scholarship has developed strong explanations for adoption, continuance, and, to a lesser extent, switching (e.g., TAM (Davis, 1989), UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003), expectation-confirmation model (Bhattacharjee, 2001)). Yet discontinuation in highly integrated environments may not adequately be explained as the simple reverse of continuance (Addae et al., 2025; Ke and Wagner, 2026). A user may dislike a platform, criticize its complexity, or recognize its lock-in effects yet still remain within it. This suggests that in mature digital ecosystems, continued use may be sustained by forces beyond positive evaluation (Liang and Wei, 2024). The problem is especially acute in super-app contexts, where the object of discontinuation is an entire bundle of interlocking functions and routines. Existing IS theories point toward parts of this problem, but do not fully resolve it. Technology acceptance and continuance models (e.g., Davis, 1989; Bhattacharjee, 2001; Venkatesh et al., 2003) are helpful for explaining adoption and post-adoption use, yet they tend to center around beliefs, expectations, and perceived usefulness at the level of the system or feature. Push-pull-mooring approaches (e.g., Zhang et al., 2021; Liang and Wei, 2024) move closer to discontinuation by emphasizing switching pressures and constraints, but they often apply cases in which movement between platforms is assumed to be both technically and socially feasible. In a mature super-app environment, that assumption may be too weak.

Consequently, super-app discontinuation may need to be treated as a distinct IS problem. It is likely that users do not evaluate departure in all-or-nothing terms. They may imagine reducing dependence in stages, shifting some functions before others, or preserving access to certain ties and services while withdrawing from others. It is also plausible that the difficulty of leaving lies not only in technical substitution, but in the reorganization of routines, transactions, and social coordination that have already been routed through the same system. In that sense, discontinuation may be less like app replacement and more like infrastructural unbundling. WeChat (see Figure 1 for a sample screen) provides a particularly relevant case for examining this problem. As one of the most mature and deeply embedded super-app ecosystems, it offers a setting in which messaging, payment, mini-programs, official accounts, and everyday service access have been consolidated to an unusual degree (Plantin and De Seta, 2019). This makes WeChat a valuable empirical site for studying not just why users adopt or continue using a super-app, but how they imagine reducing, decentering, or discontinuing use under conditions of high sociotechnical embeddedness.



**Figure 1: WeChat Screen with Mini-programs (for retail, shopping, food, travel, and other functions)**

## Methods

### Research Design

Our study used an exploratory qualitative design informed by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and focused specifically on the phenomenon of discontinuation in a mature super-app environment. The analysis approached discontinuation as a distinct social process: how users imagine leaving, what thresholds make exit thinkable, what kinds of losses they anticipate, and the effort required to reorganize life outside the platform. The aim was therefore to theorize a bounded process, the conditions under which users imagine reducing, decentering, or leaving the platform.

### Participants and Sampling Logic

The analysis draws on a cumulative corpus of fourteen semi-structured interviews with young Chinese WeChat users. Participants were aged 18–25, had used WeChat since childhood or early adolescence, and had observed the historical expansion from a messaging tool to a super-app. To support the theoretical comparison, participants were selected along various dimensions considered analytically relevant as the analysis developed, including mainland versus cross-border experience, university versus early post-university life stage, differing levels of payment and mini-program reliance, and differing social environments across the Chinese Mainland, Hong Kong, and abroad. Consistent with a maximum variation sampling logic (Patton, 2014), this variation was not assumed in advance to determine outcomes but was maintained to ensure that emerging categories could be tested against contrasting cases. This diversity allowed the data to surface distinctions that a more homogeneous sample might have obscured, for example, between technical substitution and relational migration, payment loss versus data loss, and mainland necessity versus cross-border weakening of necessity. These contrasts sharpened progressively across the interview series, consistent with a theoretical saturation logic in which later interviews contributed diminishing new categories but increasing conceptual precision (Charmaz, 2014; Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 1995). The corpus of fourteen interviews is also consistent with empirical evidence suggesting that thematic saturation is typically approached within this range for relatively focused qualitative inquiries (Guest et al., 2006). The last interview functioned as a critical case in this regard (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Rather than introducing new substantive themes, it consolidated and extended several key analytical categories, thus providing closure.

### Interview Material and Discontinuation Focus

The interview corpus was generated through semi-structured interviews originally designed to trace participants' evolving relationship with WeChat across life stages.

Guiding questions included the following: Can you describe the main ways WeChat adds value to your daily routines, whether in work, social connections, or practical tasks? What kinds of benefits or efficiencies do you get from WeChat's integrated features, like payments or mini-programs, that you couldn't easily replace? In what ways do you feel WeChat might be limiting your choices or exposing you to higher risks, or higher costs, or less diverse information or app choices? What scenarios or changes in WeChat could make you consider leaving altogether?

Participants frequently elaborated discontinuation-related material when discussing discomfort, irreplaceability, inconvenience, future reduction, and scenarios under which WeChat might no longer be worth keeping. This yielded rich data on red lines, imagined substitutes, migration difficulty, compensation logics, and the anticipated consequences of losing contact networks. Special attention was given to passages in which participants discussed: (1) what would make them reduce or leave WeChat, (2) whether exit would be partial or total, (3) which functions could be moved first, (4) what losses mattered most, and (5) whether leaving depended on the movement of other people as well.

These materials allowed discontinuation to be reconstructed as a process of threshold judgment, modular unbundling, and social migration, rather than as a single choice event.

## Data Collection and Preparation

Interviews were conducted in Chinese, primarily Mandarin, with occasional Cantonese elements among participants with Hong Kong connections. Interviews lasted between 18 and 35 minutes, with a mean length of 26 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and coded primarily in the original Chinese to preserve linguistic and cultural nuance. English translations were produced later for publication and were used selectively in reporting, especially where in vivo phrases were analytically important. The original study maintained an audit trail documenting transcription validation, coding decisions, memo development, and iterative codebook revision, and those materials were also used in the present discontinuation analysis.

## Data Analysis Strategy

The analysis followed Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory procedures, emphasizing line-by-line open coding, focused coding, constant comparison, and reflexive memo-writing. The coding process was inductive. Instead of imposing an ex ante discontinuation framework, the researchers always returned to the full interview corpus and coded exit-related passages afresh, with attention to action, process, and conditionality. Figure 2 demonstrates the coding process and follow paragraphs describe in further detail below.

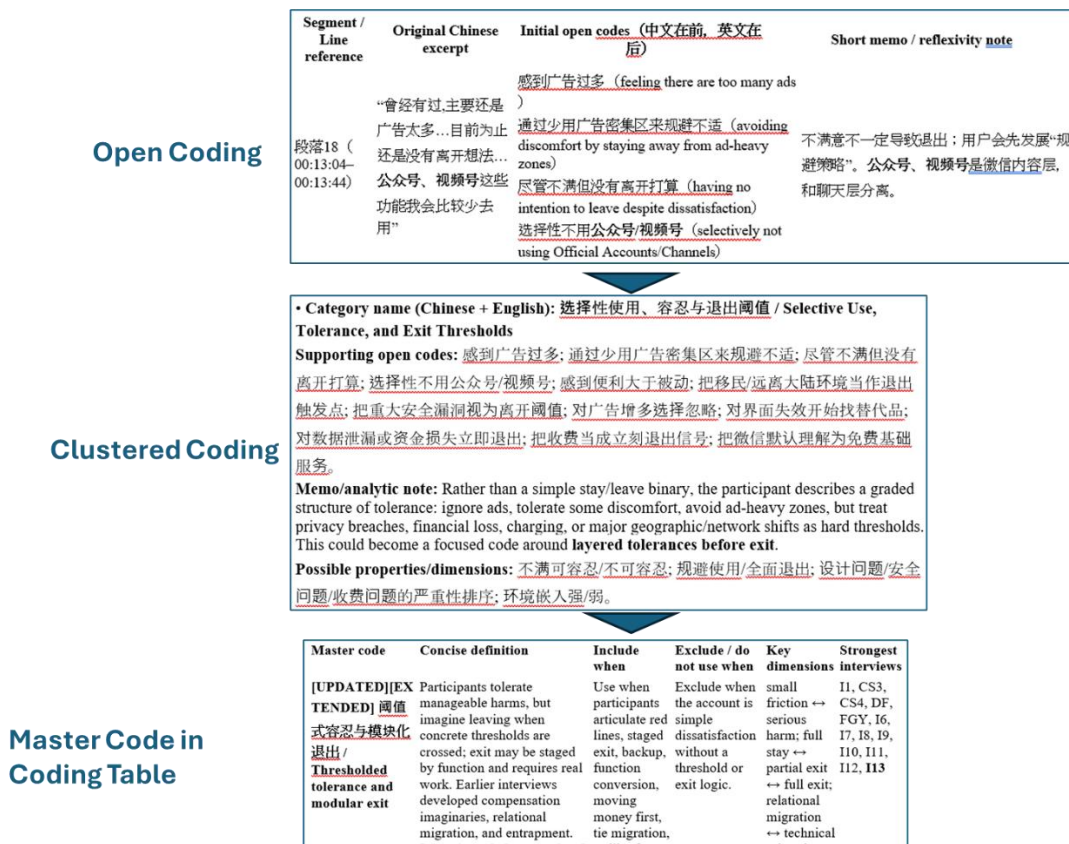


Figure 2: Coding and Synthesis Model

In the first pass, discontinuation-relevant segments were extracted and coded using open codes that stayed close to participants' language when possible, including in vivo formulations such as "吞了我的钱" ("swallowed my money"), "别无选择" ("no other choice"), and "像搬家一样" ("like moving house"). These open codes emerged from repeated engagement with the material and were progressively refined through memo-writing and comparison across cases. In the second pass, open codes were clustered through focused coding into higher-order categories. Five analytical foci emerged inductively from this process as the most consistent and theoretically productive axes of discontinuation experience: what would make participants reduce or leave WeChat; whether exit would be partial or total; which functions could be moved first; what losses mattered most; and whether leaving depended on the movement of other people as well. New interviews and later cases were then compared against these emerging categories to determine whether they confirmed, extended, bounded, or complicated them.

Analytical closure for the core discontinuation process was assessed using the criterion of theoretical sufficiency (Morse, 1995), the point at which additional interviews no longer generated genuinely new core processes. The present article thus claims theoretical sufficiency for the main social process through which users imagine discontinuation: thresholded tolerance, staged or modular exit, and the labor of relational migration, but not for every possible variation in exit experience or for WeChat use as a whole. For example, monetary figures, are treated as analytically illuminating but exploratory, as they show how participants price disruption and transition work, but do not yet constitute a fully stabilized dimension across cases.

## Results

Across the fourteen interviews, discontinuation did not appear as a simple decision to stop using WeChat. Instead, it emerged as the problem of unwinding a platform that had become a default communication, transaction, and coordination infrastructure. The broader corpus shows that this embeddedness is produced not only by social attachment, but by a set of specific IT arrangements: one account used across many services, group-chat based notification systems, QR-code entry into transactions and services, embedded payment, lightweight mini-programs that reduce downloading and maintenance costs, and the concentration of everyday routines inside one mobile interface. Participants therefore did not usually describe WeChat as merely a preferred app. They described it as the place where communication, information, payment, and routine action had already been technically and socially aligned.

### **Finding 1: Relational Installation as the Foundation of Lock-in**

A first recurrent pattern is that WeChat retention was strongly shaped by networked defaulting rather than isolated feature preference. Many participants began using WeChat because family members, classmates, teachers, and friends were already there, often in the context of a broader generational migration from QQ to WeChat. In this sense, the platform was often adopted as a relationship infrastructure before it was embraced as a bundle of attractive functions. Several interviews explicitly framed WeChat as the "first contact choice" or as the platform one had to use because others had already concentrated their communication there. Exit is thus constrained from the beginning by a socially distributed installed base instead of individual satisfaction and agency.

### **Finding 2: Integrated Infrastructure of Mini-Programs**

A second pattern is that participants repeatedly described WeChat's stickiness in infrastructural and technical terms. The role of IT here is concrete. Mini-programs were valued because they avoided separate downloads, updates, and maintenance; a single identity and login could be carried across multiple services; QR-code entry made it easy to move from offline settings into digital ordering, payment, registration, or service access; and payment could be completed inside the same interface in which communication was

already happening. Several participants emphasized that the platform reduced repeated authentication, repetitive data entry, and friction between separate apps. Others highlighted storage savings, seamless login, and the ability to complete a task with “just WeChat” rather than maintaining multiple standalone applications. These are not incidental conveniences. They are the technical mechanisms through which a super-app transforms from a communication tool into an integrated service environment.

At the same time, the corpus shows that not all technical layers of the ecosystem matter equally. Communication remained the most consistent core across cases, especially one-to-one messaging, group chat, and the receipt of routine information. Payment was often described as a second core, and in some interviews, it became the decisive anchor because it turned WeChat into an e-wallet, a transfer medium for family and peer transactions, and a convenient payment channel. Mini-programs added major convenience, but their indispensability was more variable. For some, mini-programs were among the hardest functions to replace because they bundled transit, ordering, ticketing, and other services into a lightweight access layer. For others, mini-programs were secondary and replaceable by specialized apps or offline alternatives.

### **Finding 3: Technology Promotes Institutional Embedding and Obligatory Participation**

A third major finding is that WeChat’s indispensability is reproduced through institutional as well as interpersonal coordination. The interviews show that group chats are not just social spaces. They function as semi-mandatory infrastructures for classes, coursework, student organizations, work communication, notices, and everyday coordination. Participants described teachers requiring separate groups for different subjects, university life intensifying dependence on group-based notifications, and one day away from WeChat creating anxiety about missed messages that could affect work or study. Official accounts and mini-programs also appeared as gateways through which routine tasks had to be performed. In these cases, WeChat was not independently chosen; it was embedded into the workflow architecture of education, service access, and organizational life (Huang & Miao, 2021). This moves the analysis beyond “social media dependence”. The platform is performing the IT role of notification router, coordination hub, and access layer for semi-formal and formal tasks.

This institutional embedding also explains why discontinuation was so often described as almost impossible even when technical substitutes existed. Participants were aware of alternatives but using them was not an option if the institution (e.g., school) only interacted via WeChat.

### **Finding 4: The Convenience–Coercion Tension**

A fourth pattern is that the same IT integration that produces convenience also produces overload, centralization, and new forms of friction. Participants repeatedly described bloat, too many group chats, work and personal communication mixing together, accidental entry into Channels, phone heating and lagging, and being pushed into official-account or mini-program workflows that sometimes made “normal tasks” more complicated.

Others raised concentration risks associated with linking communication, money, personal data, and identity in one place. In these accounts, IT plays a double role. Integration reduces switching costs and procedural friction, but it also increases attentional burden, collapses contextual boundaries, and concentrates dependency (Hasselwander, 2026). This is why criticism did not always produce exit: the same architecture that generated complaint also continued to solve coordination problems efficiently enough to remain the default.

### **Finding 5: Context-Dependent Necessity and Regional Variation**

Finally, the corpus clarifies that discontinuation is shaped by geography and platform ecology. Cross-regional interviews showed that WeChat’s necessity is stronger in mainland settings where payment, transit, service access, and communication are more densely routed through it, while Hong Kong and overseas

settings make some functions easier to redistribute across Alipay, NFC, Octopus, Visa, WhatsApp, Instagram, or specialized apps.

The findings and corresponding interviewee quotes are summarized below in Table 1.

**Table 1. Summary of Findings with Illustrative Interview Quotes**

| Finding No. | Finding Summary                                                          | Interviewee Quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1           | Relational Installation as the Foundation of Lock-in                     | <i>"I initially started using WeChat because some peers around me started using it and everyone added each other on WeChat, thinking it was fun and allowed timely socializing. Also, because people around me didn't use other social apps ..."</i> (Participant 11)                                                                                                                                      |
| 2           | Integrated Infra-structure of Mini-Programs                              | <i>"You can do many things inside one app... mini-programs are convenient... you don't need to pre-install anything... when you open it directly in WeChat it becomes your fastest option."</i> (Participant 13) <i>"It becomes your e-wallet... you don't need to carry physical cards anymore... once your information is synced online... going out becomes much more convenient."</i> (Participant 13) |
| 3           | Technology Promotes Institutional Embedding and Obligatory Participation | <i>"At the very beginning it was mainly course groups — when we entered school some courses required us to create groups, and teachers and mentors would post notifications inside them."</i> (Participant 12)                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 4           | Convenience–Coercion Tension                                             | <i>"But as for the downsides, sometimes it makes the entire WeChat program — both its size and its performance occupancy — increase. Especially the introduction of mini-programs often causes the phone to heat up or even lag."</i> (Participant 11)                                                                                                                                                     |
| 5           | Context Dependency / Regional Variation                                  | <i>"Before coming to Hong Kong, my frequency of using WeChat was the highest in my daily life, but after arriving in Hong Kong, for payments I use Alipay or NFC much more often compared to WeChat."</i> (Participant 7)                                                                                                                                                                                  |

But these alternatives do not dissolve dependence uniformly. Payment is often more replaceable across regions than communication and group coordination. Even where multiple payment systems coexist, participants still described social contact, formal messaging, and informational coordination as the hardest layers to leave behind. The corpus therefore strengthens the claim that discontinuation depends not on a single universal core, but on a contextually varying configuration of technical integration, social concentration, and local infrastructure.

Taken together, these findings offer a nuanced explanation for super-app discontinuation. Users generally tolerate manageable inconvenience, clutter, and even some dissatisfaction so long as WeChat continues to work as an integrated sociotechnical infrastructure (Ju et al., 2019). Exit becomes thinkable when specific thresholds are crossed, but what must then be migrated is not only social connection. It is also a technically assembled workflow made up of chat histories, group structures, payment routines, account linkages, QR-code practices, and embedded service pathways. The results show that discontinuation is not merely relationally difficult; it is difficult because social relations are stabilized through particular IT arrangements that make the platform both efficient and hard to unbundle.

## Discussion

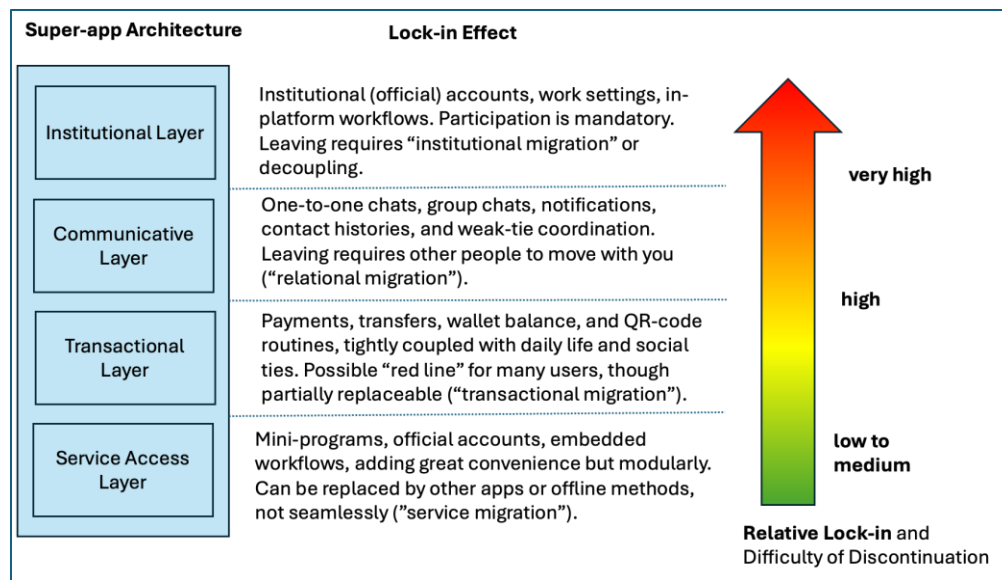
The interview corpus informs the theoretical argument of this article in an important way. The original discontinuation account was already moving away from a simple dissatisfaction model and toward thresholds, modular exit, and relational migration. The interviews explained that WeChat retains users because communication, payment, notifications, identity, service access, and lightweight applications have been technically bundled into a single operational environment (Steinberg, 2020; Loh et al., 2025). In a mature super-app, discontinuation is therefore best understood as the attempted dismantling of a technically organized mode of everyday social coordination.

Discontinuation thus is not simply attitudinal, but infrastructural. While traditional continuance or switching models are useful for explaining why a user may prefer one system over another (e.g., Lin et al., 2022), our findings indicate that mature super-app lock-in is generated through a denser configuration of technical affordances and institutional routinization. A user may be dissatisfied with clutter, commercialization, recommendation features, or centralization, yet still remains because the platform minimizes transaction costs, synchronizes communication and payment, supports default QR-code entry into offline activities, and routes formal and informal coordination through one interface. The platform is not just a container of functions; it is the architecture through which daily tasks can be or even must be performed (Constantinides et al., 2018; Leonardi et al., 2012; Tiwana et al., 2010).

The findings also refine the meaning of lock-in. Lock-in is not reducible to “no alternatives”. Participants often named substitutes: Alipay for payment, WhatsApp or Instagram for communication, specialized apps for transport, dining, mapping, or information, and offline ordering for some mini-program tasks. However, these alternatives do not reproduce the same degree of interoperability, default recognition, and social concentration. They result in repeated registration and identity verification, added maintenance, weaker synchronization, and poorer continuity between messaging and transaction. It also means asking other people to move. Super-app lock-in is therefore not merely a market outcome; it is a sociotechnical condition produced by interoperability advantages inside the platform and interoperability deficits outside it.

### Layers of Dependence and Lock-in Effects

Our findings suggest that discontinuation should be modeled as an interaction between four layers of dependence, ranked by lock-in strength. First and strongest is the institutionalization layer: schools, workplaces, merchants, and service providers route participation through WeChat groups, official accounts, or in-platform workflows. In such cases, WeChat becomes a coordination infrastructure for semi-formal and formal life rather than merely a social medium, which helps explain the recurring language of “default use”, “must check”, “being trapped”, and “no real choice”. Second is the communicative layer, the most consistently difficult to replace: one-to-one chat, group coordination, formal or semi-formal notices, and the social expectation that “normal” communication happens in WeChat. Third is the transactional layer: payment, transfer, wallet balance, and the coupling of financial routines with existing social ties. This layer was often central and sometimes decisive, but also more sensitive to local payment ecologies. Fourth is the service-access layer, the most uneven across cases: mini-programs, official accounts, QR-based entry points, and embedded service flows. Some participants saw mini-programs as one of WeChat’s strongest infrastructural advantages; others treated them as replaceable or even as a source of friction. This means that discontinuation is not governed by one monolithic “dependence on WeChat”, but by shifting combinations across the four layers. Figure 3 depicts the four lock-in layers based on their relative strength.



**Figure 3: Super-app Architecture and Lock-in Effects**

The interview results also challenge any purely beneficial views of IT integration. Participants repeatedly valued integration because it saves time, compresses steps, reduces app clutter, and simplifies access. Yet the same integration was also described as bloating the app, collapsing work and personal boundaries, increasing attentional demands, encouraging accidental exposure to unwanted features, and concentrating risk when money, messages, and personal data are placed in one account. This convenience–coercion tension is crucial. Users remain because the integrated architecture works well enough for daily coordination, even while they experience it as cluttered, centralizing, or overbearing. Discontinuation theory therefore needs to account for a form of lock-in sustained by useful infrastructure rather than by obvious failure (Altrichter & Benoit, 2025; Soliman and Rinta-Kahila, 2020).

Finally, the cross-regional interviews strengthen the argument that super-app discontinuation is context-dependent rather than universally fixed (Steinberg, 2020). The technical and social necessity of WeChat was strongest in the Chinese Mainland, compared to Hong Kong, or overseas settings. Constant, however, is that discontinuation becomes easier only when both technical and *social* alternatives are available. Leaving is not simply app switching, but a reorganization of a way of living that has been materially assembled through platform design, social concentration, and local infrastructure (Leonardi et al., 2012).

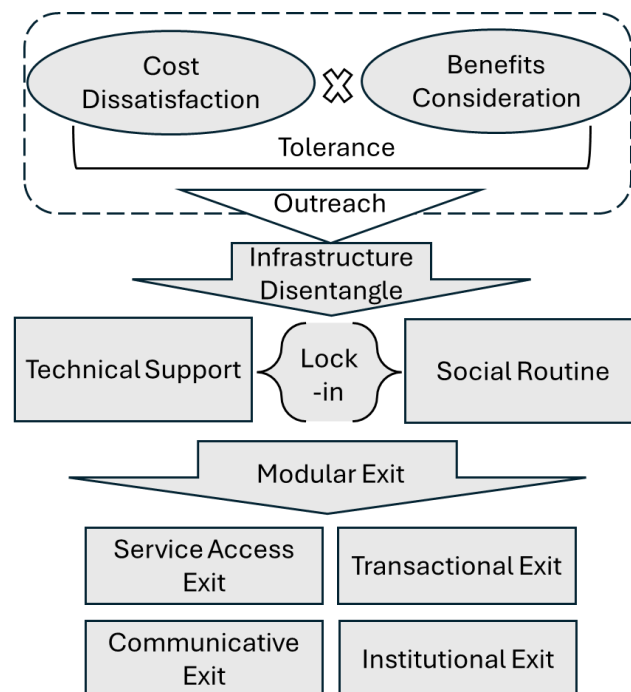
## SALDiM as a Sociotechnical Model

Taken together, these findings reframe the Super-App Lock-in Discontinuation Model (SALDiM) (see Figure 4) as a sociotechnical discontinuation model rather than a purely relational or attitudinal one. Three theoretical refinements follow from this reframing.

First, thresholded tolerance is not simply a psychological phenomenon. Thresholds are crossed inside an environment structured by IT integration, which means that the same level of dissatisfaction produces different exit probabilities depending on how deeply a user's workflows, payments, and social coordination are embedded in the platform. Dissatisfaction is necessary but not sufficient; infrastructural disentanglement is the binding constraint.

Second, modular exit is not just a social strategy. The modules suggest technically distinct layers, communication, transaction, and service access, with different substitutability and migration costs, and different dependencies.

Third, relational migration cannot be separated from technical migration. Moving contacts means moving data, chat histories, account linkages, and workflow routines. The "moving house" metaphor, taken directly from participants' own language, captures this precisely.



**Figure 4. Super-App Lock-in Discontinuation Model (SALDiM)**

## Discontinuation Process in SALDiM

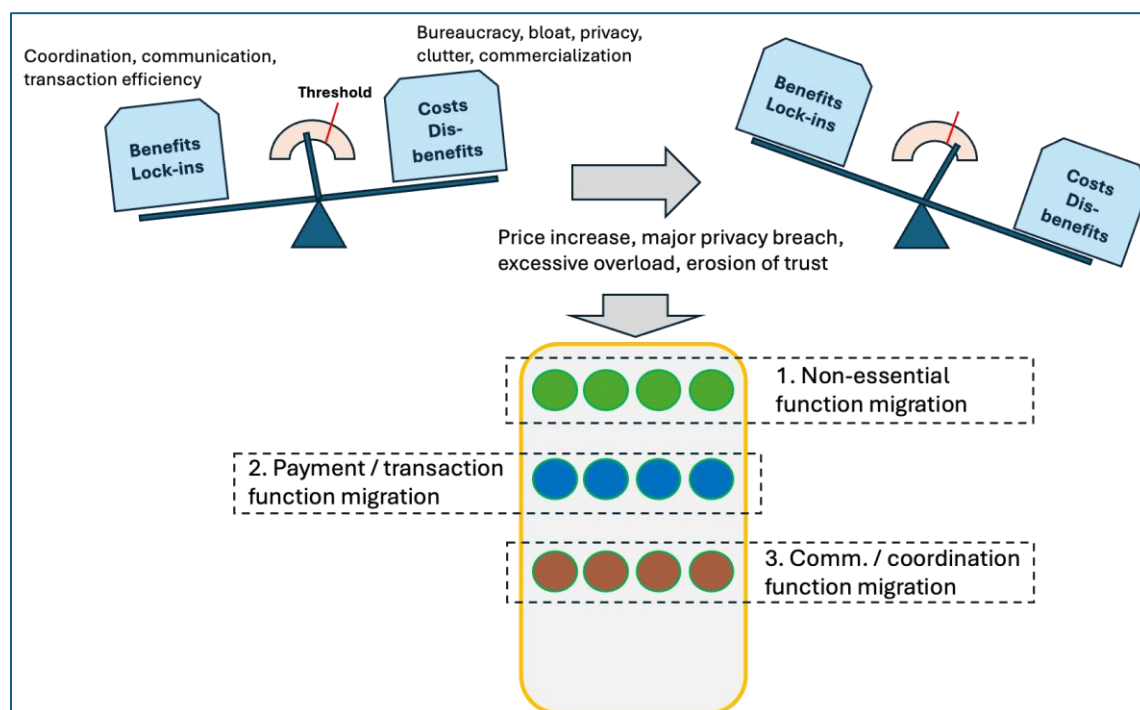
Building on this sociotechnical framing, SALDiM conceptualizes the discontinuation process as thresholded, staged, and labor-intensive unbundling of platform infrastructure (depicted in Figure 5). Users exhibit thresholded tolerance, enduring significant clutter, feature bloat, privacy concerns, commercialization, and even overt dislike as long as WeChat continues to function as an efficient coordination system for daily communication, transactions, and routines. Exit only becomes imaginable when specific thresholds are crossed — such as a price increase, major privacy breach, excessive overload, or erosion of trust.

Once triggered, discontinuation rarely manifests as immediate deletion. Instead, participants imagined staged or modular unbundling, beginning with the most replaceable outer layer and progressing inward. Non-essential mini-programs and service-access functions are typically shifted first to specialized apps or offline alternatives. Payment and transactional routines follow, where feasible, although their centrality often makes them a decisive red line. Communication and social coordination — comprising one-to-one messaging, group chats, notifications, and contact histories — remain the innermost and most resistant core, as they are deeply entangled with existing relationships. This process demands substantial migration labor on both technical and relational fronts (Leonardi et al., 2012). Technically, users must rebuild workflows, re-establish account linkages, transfer data, and learn new interfaces. Relationally, successful migration

frequently requires coordinating with family, friends, classmates, or colleagues. This is a high effort process.

Institutional lock-in further compounds these challenges. In educational and organizational settings, WeChat often functions as a semi-mandatory infrastructure: teachers create subject-specific groups, universities route notices through official accounts, and workplaces embed coordination in platform workflows (Constantinides & Barrett, 2015). Such mandatory participation transforms the platform from a voluntary tool into an obligatory coordination environment, raising the social and practical costs of exit and limiting individual agency even when personal dissatisfaction is high.

SALDiM thus advances IS theory by identifying that, in mature super-apps, discontinuation is constrained both by attitude and by the technical integration of socially embedded routines. The very features that generate convenience simultaneously make infrastructural unbundling difficult.



**Figure 5: Discontinuation Process**

## Limitations and Future Outlook

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the discontinuation findings presented here. First, the study is based on a relatively small sample of young Chinese WeChat users whose experiences are shaped by long-term exposure to a highly mature super-app ecosystem. Most participants began using WeChat in childhood or early adolescence and had lived through its expansion from messaging tool to everyday infrastructure. This makes the dataset uniquely valuable for tracing processes of embeddedness and imagined exit, but it also means the findings may not transfer directly to older adopters, later adopters, or users in less consolidated platform environments. The discontinuation patterns identified here are therefore best understood as theoretically suggestive rather than statistically generalizable.

Second, the study relies on retrospective interview accounts rather than direct observation of actual discontinuation behavior. Participants were often highly articulate about when they would consider leaving, what would trigger exit, and how much compensation might make exit worthwhile. However, these narratives are conjectured rather than observed acts. This matters especially for the monetary material. Participants may claim to reject even a tiny recurring fee, but none demonstrated the actual behavior. Accordingly, the present study is stronger on exit imaginaries, threshold logics, and anticipated migration labor than on verified platform abandonment trajectories.

A third limitation concerns scope. The present findings are strongest at the level of broad process categories: thresholded tolerance, modular exit, relational migration, and context-dependent necessity. They are less saturated at the level of subgroup comparison. Geographic variation, cross-border mobility, degree of payment dependence, and differences between strong-tie and weak-tie networks all appear important, but the sample is not yet large enough to map these dimensions systematically across user types. Interview 14 is particularly valuable because it sharpens several boundary conditions—payment-first indispensability, privacy resignation, polite tie governance, and recognition of monopoly without resistance—but one case cannot settle how widespread these patterns are.

The above limitations point directly to future research priorities. A first step would be to conduct additional theoretically sampled interviews focused explicitly on discontinuation, with participants who have already reduced or partially exited WeChat. This would allow clearer comparison between imagined exit and enacted exit. A second priority is to refine the monetary dimension by distinguishing among symbolic buyout, practical transition cost, and compensation for relational loss, which appear conflated in current narratives. Finally, comparative research across age groups, regulatory environments, and less monopolistic platform ecologies would help clarify which discontinuation processes are specific to WeChat's mature Chinese context and which may generalize to other emerging super-app systems.

### Conclusion

This study examined how users imagine discontinuation in a mature super-app environment, and what processes make exit difficult, partial, or conditional. Discontinuation emerged as a sociotechnical problem: users must attempt to separate communication, payment, service access, notices, and relationship maintenance from a platform that has become deeply integrated into everyday life.

The study makes three main contributions. First, it shows that discontinuation is governed less by generalized dissatisfaction than by threshold judgments. Users often tolerated clutter, feature bloat, commercialization, privacy unease, and other annoyances so long as the platform continued to function as a reliable infrastructure for communication, payment, and routine coordination. Exit became thinkable only when burdens outweighed the effort of reorganizing online functionalities elsewhere. Second, the study shows that discontinuation is usually imagined as incremental, such as redistributing payment, replacing selected mini-program uses, or decentering WeChat in specific domains before contemplating full departure. Third, and most importantly, the study demonstrates that the greatest obstacle to discontinuation is not the absence of technical substitutes in the abstract, but the difficulty of rebuilding the interoperability and social concentration that the super-app already provides.

Taken together, these findings suggest that super-app discontinuation should be theorized as the attempted disentanglement of a socially embedded and technically integrated infrastructure. SALDiM therefore contributes a discontinuation-oriented perspective that emphasizes thresholded tolerance, modular

unbundling, relational migration, and context-dependent necessity, while placing the role of IT at the center of the explanation.

Notably, the WeChat case is not an isolated phenomenon. The super-app model is actively being replicated and extended across global platform ecosystems. LINE in Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand (Steinberg, 2020), and KakaoTalk in South Korea (Kim, 2025), have consolidated messaging, payment, food delivery, financial services, and transportation into deeply integrated environments structurally analogous to WeChat. X (formerly Twitter), under its current ownership, has explicitly positioned itself as an "everything app," attempting to integrate payments, communication, content, and commerce in a direct effort to reproduce the WeChat model for Western markets. Meta's WhatsApp has introduced payment functionality in major markets including India and Brazil, with limited success. Meanwhile, Grab and Gojek have long operated as mature super-apps across Southeast Asia. The lock-in mechanisms identified in this study—technical bundling, relational migration costs, and institutional embeddedness—are therefore not unique to WeChat or to the Chinese platform context. Seemingly, the super-app model is designed to be a social trap. Its key benefit, single-account interoperability, frictionless payment, and seamless service, make exit *structurally* difficult, if not impossible. Even if users are not coerced into remaining; they are made comfortable within a system they cannot easily leave (van Dijck et al., 2018).

The findings also reveal a collective action problem. A single user cannot migrate without asking significant others to move as well. Institutional embeddedness further decouples individual intention from practical exit behaviors. Continuation is thus the rational response of individuals who understand the coordination problem they face. This has direct implications for platform governance and regulatory thinking. Existing competition frameworks are poorly equipped to address the form of power that super-apps exercise. As the super-app model spreads globally, the corresponding lock-in effect will become an increasingly common feature of digital life. SALDiM offers a framing for such an analysis.

## Acknowledgements

This research is partly supported by Start-up Research Grant (The Education University of Hong Kong) RG 39/2025-2026R.

## References

- Addae, J. A., Ahmed, S., Ofori, K. S., Abubakari, A., & Sharma, A. (2025). Understanding users' continuance adoption of FinTechs through the lens of the behavioural reasoning theory: Insights from PLS-SEM and fs-QCA. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 1–31.
- Altrichter, B., & Benoit, S. (2025). Technology discontinuance: a systematic literature review and research agenda. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 34(6), 1088-1112.
- Bhattacharjee, A. (2001). Understanding information systems continuance: An expectation-confirmation model. *MIS Quarterly*, 25(3), 351–370.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Constantinides, P., & Barrett, M. (2015). Information infrastructure development and governance as collective action. *Information Systems Research*, 26(1), 40–56.

- Constantinides, P., Henfridsson, O., & Parker, G. G. (2018). Introduction—Platforms and infrastructures in the digital age. *Information Systems Research*, 29(2), 381–400.
- Davis, F. D. (1989). Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and user acceptance of information technology. *MIS Quarterly*, 13(3), 319–340.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82.
- Hasselwander, M. (2026). Super Apps, Super Wallets, and Everything Apps. *Strategic Business Research*, 100130.
- Huang, Y., & Miao, W. (2021). Re-domesticating social media when it becomes disruptive: Evidence from China's "super app" WeChat. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 9(2), 177–194.
- Ju, B., Sandel, T. L., & Thinyane, H. (2019). WeChat use of mainland Chinese dual migrants in daily border crossing. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 12(4), 377–394.
- Ke, X., & Wagner, C. (2026). Exploring relationships between video game experience and amateur esports participation: A configurational approach. *International Journal of Human–Computer Interaction*, 42(6), 3944–3963.
- Kim, B. (2025). South Korea's Megacorp and super app: Kakao's paths to market dominance. *Media, Culture & Society*, 47(4), 641–659.
- Leonardi, P. M., Nardi, B. A., & Kallinikos, J. (Eds.). (2012). *Materiality and organizing: Social interaction in a technological world*. Oxford University Press.
- Liang, S., & Wei, Z. (2024). Understanding users' app-switching behavior during the mobile search: An empirical study from the perspective of push–pull–mooring framework. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(11), 989.
- Lin, J., Yin, J., Wei, K. K., Chan, H. C., & Teo, H. H. (2022). Comparing competing systems: An extension of the information systems continuance model. *MIS Quarterly*, 46(4), 1851–1874.
- Loh, X. M., Shyu, W. H., Lee, V. H., Huang, H. L., Tan, G. W. H., & Ooi, K. B. (2025). Super App: A multi-analytical cross-country approach on the "everything" app. *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, 1–14.
- Lucas Júnior, D., & Lopes, E. (2024). Defining a super app and analyzing it from an ecosystemic perspective. In *AMCIS 2024 Proceedings (Paper 7)*.  
<https://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2024/adoptdiff/adoptdiff/7>
- Morse, J. M. (1995). The significance of saturation. *Qualitative Health Research*, 5(2), 147–149.
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage.

- Plantin, J. C., & De Seta, G. (2019). WeChat as infrastructure: The techno-nationalist shaping of Chinese digital platforms. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 12(3), 257–273.
- Soliman, W., & Rinta-Kahila, T. (2020). Toward a refined conceptualization of IS discontinuance: Reflection on the past and a way forward. *Information & Management*, 57(2), 103167.
- Steinberg, M. (2020). LINE as super app: Platformization in East Asia. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 1–10.
- Tiwana, A., Konsynski, B., & Bush, A. A. (2010). Research commentary—Platform evolution: Coevolution of platform architecture, governance, and environmental dynamics. *Information Systems Research*, 21(4), 675–687.
- van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford University Press.
- Venkatesh, V., Morris, M. G., Davis, G. B., & Davis, F. D. (2003). User acceptance of information technology: Toward a unified view. *MIS Quarterly*, 27(3), 425–478.
- Zhang, Q., Onita, C. G., Shane Banks, M., & Zhang, X. (2021). Understanding switching behavior of mobile payment enabled transportation apps: A push-pull-mooring perspective. *Issues in Information Systems*, 22(1), 124–135.